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“They Are the Conspiracy Theorists, Not I:” Mapping the Research Selves of Counter-Establishment
Researchers

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in
Information Studies

by

Yvonne Melisande Eadon

2022

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2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“They Are the Conspiracy Theorists, Not I:” Mapping the Research Selves of Counter-
Establishment Researchers

by

Yvonne Melisande Eadon

Doctor of Philosophy in Information Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Sarah T. Roberts, Chair

Despite the fact that the act of *doing research* figures so prominently in the conspiracy canon, the information seeking practices of individuals looking into conspiracy theories remain under-theorized. This dissertation, based in qualitative, grounded-theory interviews with twelve participants, is an initial foray into the arena of investigating the information seeking practices of researchers looking into three distinct topics that have been labeled “conspiracy theories:” theories around the assassination of John F. Kennedy, UFOs and the 1947 crash at Roswell, New Mexico, and the Missing 411 phenomenon. It introduces the idea of *counter-establishment research*, which can be considered any kind of research, conducted systematically, that goes against establishment institutions, norms, and/ or consensus. These areas of research have enduring mysteries at their centers, and are often labeled “conspiracy theories,” “pseudoscientific” or “paranormal.” Counter-establishment research topics are not necessarily morally righteous by virtue of operating outside of established institutions, nor are they morally condemnable because they do. This work also presents a new theoretical framework, grounded in symbolic

interactionism: the Research Self. The Research Self has six distinct dimensions: (1) originating life stage, (2) motivations, (3) methods, (4) practices and conceptualizations, (5) identity, and (6) epistemology (see fig. 1.1 for visualization). Through outlining each counter-establishment researcher's Research Self, this dissertation examines the ways in which they seek information, the emotions that come up in the process, how these researchers relate to and think about the term "conspiracy theorist," and what their relationship to establishment research is like. Through these areas of inquiry, this dissertation starts to build a necessarily always-incomplete portrait of information seeking and behavior among counter-establishment researchers. This research puts conspiracy theory scholarship and information seeking scholarship in conversation with one another, introducing further nuance into who we think of as a "conspiracy theorist" and what it can mean to "do your own research." Without such nuance, we risk continuing down the path of shaming, debunking, and pathologizing, deepening the ever-widening channel between counter-establishment work and academic work. Thus, this work also seeks to bridge the gaps between academics and counter-establishment researchers, illustrating that debunking and pathologizing is not the only way academics can engage with counter-establishment researchers, and that watching YouTube videos or listening to podcasts is not the only way to do "one's own" counter-establishment research.

The dissertation of Yvonne Melisande Eadon is approved.

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To Mom—you will always be my intellectual and creative inspiration.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	viii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION	1
I. JFK Assassination Research	10
The Official Narrative	12
Counter-Establishment Narratives	17
II. UFOs: The Truth <i>Must</i> Be Out There	21
III. Missing 411: Strange Disappearances in the Wilderness	34
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	48
I. Information Seeking and Behavior	48
Models, Theories, Methodologies and Pathologies	48
Searching for Information in Archives	64
Archival Silences, Secrecy, Imagined Records	65
The challenges of seeking information in archives: centering the archival user	68
Searching for Information Online	72
Knowledge production in online environments	76
II. Conspiracy Theory Scholarship	79
Studying Conspiracy Theory	79
Generalism, Particularism and History	80
Discerning Disciplinary Boundaries	86
Subjugated knowledge and its production	100
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY & METHOD	109
I. Theoretical & Methodological Framework	109
Symbolic Interactionism and Grounded Theory	109
Feminist Methodology and Epistemic Empathy	118
Studying conspiracy theory	122
II. Method and Study Design	126
Research Questions	126
Study Design	129
Data collection & analysis	132
Ethical concerns & limitations of design	134
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS	136
I. Exploring Dimensions 1 (Originating Life Stage) & 2 (Motivations): Initial Experiences with the Subject and the Formation of the Research Self	140
II. Dimension 3: Methods and Methodologies	164
Interviewing	164

Fieldwork	169
Autoethnography	180
Archival & Library Research	184
Online searches	196
Other research methods	199
III. Dimension 4: Practices and Conceptualizations of Research	200
Metaphors for Research	204
Researcher expertise, identity, & reflexivity	207
Research Feelings	212
IV. Dimension 6: Epistemology: Subjugated Knowledge, Unknowledge, and Disciplinary Boundaries	224
Case Study: Ufology	225
Locating the Boundaries of A Quasi-Academic Field	225
Perspectives on Science	235
Evidence: What Makes a Source Trustworthy?	245
Unknowledge	253
Disinformation	255
Encountering Silences	258
V. Confronting the conspiracy	264
A True Conspiracy?	265
Exploring the label of “conspiracy theorist”	268
Other Conspiracy Theories	274
VI. Conclusion: Implications of the Research Self Framework	278
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION	280
Appendix A	299
Appendix B	303
Appendix C	315
Bibliography	325

List of Figures

1.1 The Spectrum of Social Harm	12
1.2 Allyn Atadero shows his son's jacket that was recovered near his remains	41
1.3 Allyn Atadero shows his son's shoes	42
1.4 Screenshot of the homepage of the CanAm Missing Project, aka Missing 411	47
1.5 Screenshot of a separate website where Paulides' books are for sale	48
2.1 Kuhlthau's Information Search Process	62
2.2 Haider and Sundin's Information Assessment Stereotypes Matrix	77
3.1 Strauss's Grounded Theory as a Triadic and Circular Process	114
3.2 Charmaz's diagram outlining the process of conducting a grounded theory study	115

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INVITED LECTURES

December 9, 2021 Center for Transdisciplinary Historical and Cultural Studies
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Title: “‘Who’s the Conspiracy Theorist? Not I’: Method, Evidence, and the Unknown in Alternative Research Communities”

June 22, 2021 AI Infodemic Speaker Series
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Title: “‘Who’s the Conspiracy Theorist? Not I’: Feedback Loops between Conspiracy Communities and Academia”

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION

As conspiracy theories continue to circulate between the fringes of society and the mainstream,¹ the empirical study of conspiracy theories, their formation, propagation, and rhetorical staying power has accelerated. Scholarship on the spread of conspiracy theories (and misinformation in general) online suggests that social media platforms lend themselves particularly well to the sharing of unverified, populist, and inflammatory content.² The serious tangible effects of conspiracy theories that spread online (the burning of 5G towers in Europe and the QAnon-fueled January 2021 insurrection, to name only two) demonstrate that scholar and practitioner communities must investigate the topic from all possible angles. Instead of relying on absolutist dichotomies—offline/online, real/unreal—we must ask: What does the pervasiveness of conspiracy theorizing today tell us, or not tell us, about the state of our democracy? How can we characterize conspiracy theorizing as epistemic practice in a postmodern, late capitalist context? What is our role as academics in writing about conspiracy theories, interacting with their proponents, and ultimately influencing them ourselves? As it can be misleading and even risky to categorize *all* conspiracy theories as inherently dangerous (or wholly harmless), my research places such theories on a dynamic spectrum of social harm, with theories that pose great political or public health risks on one end (COVID-19 hoax theories, QAnon), and more innocuous theories on the other (the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Roswell Incident). This approach to the study of conspiracy theory allows for a discussion of the phenomenon that is liberated from the reactive and the monological, while maintaining that many conspiracy theories *do* pose social harm risks which must be addressed and mitigated.

¹ Michael Barkun, “President Trump and the ‘Fringe,’” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no. 3 (May 4, 2017): 437–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1313649>.

² Jennifer M. Connolly et al., “Communicating to the Public in the Era of Conspiracy Theory,” *Public Integrity* 21, no. 5 (September 3, 2019): 469–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2019.1603045>; Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online” (Data & Society Research Institute, May 15, 2017), <https://datasociety.net/output/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/>.

While previous research has examined how conspiracy theories spread online;³ addressed what conspiracists believe and why;⁴ asked epistemological questions of whether or not conspiracy theorizing is justifiable or reasonable as a form of sense-making;⁵ and characterized the socio-cultural effects of conspiracy theories;⁶ this dissertation will examine the *how* of information seeking around three specific topics that have been repeatedly labeled “conspiracy theories.” I am explicitly *not* going to be theorizing conspiracist information seeking as a particular style, as the methods and styles of research that have come up around topics labeled as conspiracy theories are too diverse to theorize. Further, the theories I discuss in this dissertation are very low on the social harm spectrum, to the extent that I do not think it productive to call them conspiracy theories or those who research them conspiracy theorists at all.

Though it may seem as though conspiracy theories are on the rise or that we live in a so-called “age of conspiracy,”⁷ conspiracy theories in fact have a long history in the United States and globally. Some theories have had global political impacts—one powerful antisemitic conspiracy theory, that Jewish people were secretly attempting world domination (circulated globally in the early twentieth century through the falsified *Protocols of The Elders of Zion*), directly influenced the ideology of several

³ Marwick and Lewis “Media Manipulation,” 17-20; Kim Mortimer, “Understanding Conspiracy Online: Social Media and the Spread of Suspicious Thinking,” *Dalhousie Journal of Interdisciplinary Management* 13, no. 1 (April 6, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.5931/djim.v13i1.6928>; Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, “The Spread of True and False News Online,” *Science* 359, no. 6380 (March 9, 2018): 1146–51, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>.

⁴ Viren Swami et al., “Conspiracist Ideation in Britain and Austria: Evidence of a Monological Belief System and Associations between Individual Psychological Differences and Real-World and Fictitious Conspiracy Theories,” *British Journal of Psychology* 102, no. 3 (2011): 443–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8295.2010.02004.x>; Marina Abalakina-Paap et al., “Beliefs in Conspiracies,” *Political Psychology* 20, no. 3 (1999): 637–47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00160>.

⁵ David Coady, *What to Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 111-137; Matthew R.X. Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 14-18.

⁶ Karen M. Douglas and Robbie M. Sutton, “The Hidden Impact of Conspiracy Theories: Perceived and Actual Influence of Theories Surrounding the Death of Princess Diana,” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 148, no. 2 (April 1, 2008): 210–22, <https://doi.org/10.3200/SOCP.148.2.210-222>.

⁷ Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M Douglas, “Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations,” *Memory Studies* 10, no. 3 (July 1, 2017): 323–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017701615>.

prominent leaders in Nazi Germany.⁸ Furthermore, an ambitious analysis of over 100,000 randomly selected published letters that readers sent *The New York Times* and *The Chicago Tribune* between 1890 and 2010 showed that, though there were fluctuations, conspiratorial content remained consistently prevalent over time.⁹ Some scholars, like Lance deHaven-Smith, claim that the term “conspiracy theorist” was essentially invented by the CIA in reference to theories surrounding the Kennedy assassination.¹⁰ Kathryn Olmsted confirms this: although the term was not invented by the CIA per se, it was indeed used in a much more widespread way among government officials in response to the Kennedy assassination.¹¹

“Conspiracy theorist,” is a notably sticky designation, particularly as polls show that a significant proportion of Americans believe at least one conspiracy theory.¹² Defining “conspiracy,” “conspiracy theory,” and “conspiracy theorist” is notoriously difficult, having been tackled by political scientists, sociologists, and philosophers alike. At its broadest and most basic, a conspiracy involves a group of people planning something in secret. Matthew R. X. Dentith defines a conspiracy as having three conditions: “1. The Conspirators Condition—There exists (or existed) some set of agents with a plan. 2. The Secrecy Condition—Steps have been taken by the agents to minimise public awareness of what they are up to, and 3. The Goal Condition—Some end is or was desired by the agents.”¹³ According to these conditions, anything from a surprise party to the assassination of a politician to the plotting of several governments toward a new world order could be considered a conspiracy. Dentith¹⁴ goes on to define a

⁸ David Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2010), 45.

⁹ Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Lance DeHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2013).

¹¹ Kathryn Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹² Dan Cassino and Krista Jenkins, “Conspiracy Theories Prosper: 25% of Americans Are ‘Truthers’” (Fairleigh Dickinson University’s Public Mind Poll, January 17, 2013), <http://publicmind.fdu.edu/2013/outthere/final.pdf>; J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, “Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion,” *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (2014): 952–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12084>; Joseph E. Uscinski and Casey Klofstad, “Florida Believes in Conspiracy Theories Too,” News, Orlando Sentinel, September 6, 2018, <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/opinion/os-op-florida-conspiracy-theories-20180906-story.html>.

¹³ Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, 23.

¹⁴ Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, 30.

conspiracy *theory* as any speculation about an event that alleges conspiratorial causes for that event. This definition allows for conspiracy *theorists* to be discussed in terms of their myriad actions and beliefs, not simply their political, historical, or cultural function.

Prominent conspiracy theorists will often employ the phrase “do your own research” as a kind of call to action, implying that “the truth is out there”¹⁵—all it takes to uncover it is thorough research and an open mind. Kony Rowe, creator of the popular 9/11 Truth film *Loose Change*, responded to accusations that his film contained several inaccuracies with: “We know there are errors in the documentary, and we’ve actually left them in there so that people discredit us and do the research for themselves.”¹⁶ Similarly, Rob Brotherton references the notorious David Icke, propagator of the theory that all powerful figures are secretly humanoid lizards: “The conspirators leave subtle symbols of their plot lying around, Icke says, and ‘when you know what you’re looking for, it starts jumping out at you.’”¹⁷ Conspiracy theorists often emulate academic rhetoric while at the same time subverting and challenging the epistemic authority of science and academia.¹⁸ Emma A. Jane and Chris Fleming have in fact characterized conspiracy theorizing as a kind of “folk sociology.”¹⁹ On the whole, however, academics, journalists, politicians, and non-conspiracists in general often dismiss conspiracy theorists uncritically and out of hand by virtue of the perceived danger or ignorance of their ideas.²⁰

Despite the fact that the act of *doing research* figures so prominently in the conspiracy canon, the information-seeking practices of individuals looking into conspiracy theories remain under examined.

¹⁵ As *The X Files*’ Fox Mulder would say.

¹⁶ Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History*, 14.

¹⁷ Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2015), 227.

¹⁸ Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers, “Contesting Epistemic Authority: Conspiracy Theories on the Boundaries of Science,” *Public Understanding of Science* 24, no. 4 (May 1, 2015): 466–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662514559891>.

¹⁹ Emma A. Jane and Chris Fleming, *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 54.

²⁰ Jack Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2008); Didier Fassin, “The Politics of Conspiracy Theories: On AIDS in South Africa and a Few Other Global Plots The Politics of HIV/AIDS,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, no. 2 (2011 2010): 39–50; Harambam and Aupers, “Contesting Epistemic Authority.”

Highly cited works within the canon of conspiracy theory scholarship, notably Hofstadter²¹ and Sunstein and Vermeule,²² have pointedly suggested, but not fully developed, the idea that conspiracy theorists seek information in unique ways. These scholars, however, address conspiracy theorizing as a dangerous social problem to be solved. Hofstadter²³ suggests that the way that “paranoid” individuals conduct research, rather than expanding their worldview, in fact isolates them even further from differing viewpoints. Sunstein and Vermeule²⁴ argue similarly that the online environment has enabled conspiracists to form “epistemologically isolated groups or networks.” Put in information seeking parlance, these scholars argue that conspiracists react to information overload online by avoiding resources that contradict their perspective, often isolating themselves in echo chambers. Access to sufficient relevant information has been touted as one way to quell conspiracy theorizing.²⁵ While it is apparent that all research, including research into conspiracy theories, is rooted in questions of information access, seeking, and overload, the conclusions made by Hofstadter and Sunstein and Vermeule are too simple and too prescriptive. Furthermore, the approach these scholars take is pejorative, not only calling individuals interested in counter-establishment topics “conspiracy theorists” but also “paranoid” and more prone to getting caught in echo chambers than the average person. I argue in this dissertation that “conspiracy theories” is a label for a category of phenomena that is so diverse in its political, social, ethical, epistemological, and factual commitments that to categorize these topics as such is no longer analytically useful, if it ever was.

Scholars have tried to mitigate the issue of pejorative labeling with terminological adjustments. Jack Bratich differentiates between “conspiracy theorizing” and “conspiracism.” In his words, *conspiracism* “gathers conspiracy theories together under the unity of an ‘ism’ to describe a body of

²¹ Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Random House: Vintage Books, 2008).

²² Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures*,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (June 1, 2009): 202–27, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2008.00325.x>.

²³ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 2008, 38.

²⁴ Sunstein and Vermeule “Conspiracy Theories,” 2009.

²⁵ Lee Basham, “Afterthoughts on Conspiracy Theory: Resilience and Ubiquity,” in *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, ed. David Coady (Routledge, 2006); Sunstein and Vermeule “Conspiracy Theories,” 2009.

thought that regards conspiracies as a driving force in history.”²⁶ Bratich points out that this term is often employed as a way to talk about conspiracy theorizing as a potentially dangerous social phenomenon. Thomas Milan-Konda defines conspiracism as “a mental framework, a belief system, a worldview that leads people to look for conspiracies, to anticipate them, to link them together into a grander overarching conspiracy.”²⁷ Bratich also discusses several other terms related to *conspiracism*, including “conspiracy research,” which he says “attempts to authorize and legitimize the knowledge claims of the enterprise. Calling it ‘research’ obviously tries to give the accounts intellectual grounding in social science or journalism.”²⁸ Yet, if the kind of information seeking that conspiracists conduct is *not* research, then what is it? Those who research topics that have been labeled “conspiracy theories” do so in a manner as diverse in method as mainstream academia. At least for the three topics examined in this dissertation, research into conspiracy theories is merely research, not a particular *kind* of research.

In the early stages of my project, I used the term “conspiracist researcher” to refer to those who conducted research into conspiracy theory topics. It was only after a phone conversation with Bill Simpich, a prolific Kennedy assassination researcher, that I decided it was no longer useful to even use the term “conspiracist,”²⁹ despite the academic justification and hedging that I performed around the term. I have since graduated to the term “counter-establishment research” to refer to the various investigations being conducted by my study participants. Counter-establishment research refers to research that occurs outside of the mainstream and is labeled by wider society as pseudoscientific, conspiratorial, or paranormal. Counter-establishment research positions itself firmly against the grain of established institutions. Counter-establishment research topics are not necessarily morally righteous by virtue of operating outside of established institutions, nor are they morally condemnable because they do. Each

²⁶ Braitch, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, 4.

²⁷ Thomas Milan Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracies: How Delusions Have Overrun America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 2.

²⁸ Braitch, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, 5.

²⁹See Chapter 3, Methodology & Methods, for a more detailed account of this conversation.

topic of counter-establishment research must be evaluated individually for the social harm it could, or has, caused.

Because all three areas—Kennedy assassination research, Ufology, and Missing 411 research—must contend with the label “conspiracy theory,” and this contending is itself impactful, I will be engaging with conspiracy theory scholarship (sometimes referred to as “conspiracy theory theory”) throughout this dissertation. My interview participants are not conspiracy theorists, unless they identify themselves as such. So, why do I spend so much time discussing conspiracy theory scholarship? The three topics that my interviewees research have been labeled “conspiracy theories,” and some of my interviewees have been labeled “conspiracy theorists.” It is indisputable that the term *conspiracy theory* and *conspiracy theorist* has an effect on the research being done. What does it do to a research topic when the term is attached to it? What does it do to a researcher?

This dissertation constitutes the first step into the arena of investigating the information seeking practices of researchers looking into three distinct “conspiracy theory” topics. Counter-establishment research can be considered any kind of research, conducted systematically, that goes against establishment institutions, norms, and/ or consensus. These areas of research have enduring mysteries at their centers, and are often labeled “conspiracy theories,” “pseudoscientific” or “paranormal.” Counter-establishment research topics are not necessarily morally righteous by virtue of operating outside of established institutions, nor are they morally condemnable because they do. Each topic of counter-establishment research must be evaluated individually for the social harm it could, or has, caused. This dissertation examines the ways in which those researching counter-establishment topics—counter-establishment researchers—seek information, the emotions that come up in the process, how these researchers relate to and think about the term “conspiracy theorist,” and what their relationship to establishment research is like. Through these areas of inquiry, this dissertation starts to build a necessarily always-incomplete portrait of information seeking and behavior among counter-establishment researchers. This research puts conspiracy theory scholarship and information seeking scholarship in conversation with one another, introducing further nuance into who we think of as a “conspiracy theorist”

and what it can mean to “do your own research.” Without such nuance, we risk continuing down the path of shaming, debunking, and pathologizing, deepening the ever-widening channel between counter-establishment work and academic work. Thus, this work also seeks to bridge the gaps between academics and counter-establishment researchers, illustrating that debunking and pathologizing is not the only way academics can engage with counter-establishment researchers, and that watching YouTube videos or listening to podcasts is not the only way to do “one’s own” counter-establishment research.

For this project, I wanted to speak with researchers who regularly researched three distinct topics: the assassination of John F. Kennedy, UFOs (especially the crash at Roswell), and the Missing 411 phenomenon. I chose these three topics for a few reasons. I found each of them to be intriguing; I also felt unable to draw a conclusion about their rationality or irrationality, or their reality or unreality, based on my own scant knowledge of them. That is, I did not feel as though I could make a claim about whether or not they are true. I operate from this continued liminal space in the course of this dissertation research: all three of the theories examined have a potential for containing truth; because I am looking at research practices of alternative or controversial research, I am in a sense looking at these topics from a once-removed position that affords me a measurement of detachment, if not objectivity.

I also reject the notion that a position must be taken on topics such as this: my position is that these areas of research, again, contain *potential truth*. The JFK assassination and ufology are both entrenched topics, the former is especially connected and associated with the notion of *conspiracy theory*. Much has been written about them both. Missing 411, on the other hand, is a newer theory that is not as well-known as the other two. To my mind, all three of these topics are on the lower end of the spectrum of social harm. As someone who has a general interest in the mysterious, supernatural, unexplained, and paranormal, I am able to empathize epistemically with those who conduct research around them. Because they are on the lower end of the social harm spectrum, these topics do not pose as large of a risk as, say, climate change denial, QAnon, or anti-vaccination theories. Were I to interview people who researched or believed strongly in higher-harm conspiracy theories, I would not have been able to practice epistemic

empathy as readily. I also recognize that my positionality, specifically my young, white womanhood, affords me a measure of trustworthiness when interviewing other white people.

LOW HARM	HARMFUL	VERY HARMFUL
Bigfoot/ Cryptozoology	Flat Earth	QAnon
Epstein didn't kill himself	Lizard people/ Reptilians	Anti- Vaccination Theories
Celebrity döppelgängers	The moon landing was a hoax	Climate change denial

Figure 1.1: The Spectrum of Social Harm

Researcher Abbie Richards created a chart (see Appendix A) in which she rated conspiracy theories according to how true they are, categorizing them from “things that actually happened” to “world ruled by supreme elite: promotes hatred towards marginalized groups.” Equating harm with irrationality and falseness, Richards organizes her chart in an inverted triangle, illustrating that there seem to be so many more extremely harmful conspiracy theories than there are true conspiracies or even harmless conspiracy theories. While Richards’ chart is a novel way to think about conspiracy theories, especially as it organizes them in terms of both harm and irrationality, my approach focuses explicitly on harm as an organizational metric. I have not included the topics explored in this dissertation (which cause little to no harm) as part of this chart out of respect for my participants, several of whom explicitly stated that they did not want to be associated with theories like QAnon or Flat Earth. Further, this dissertation alleges that these three topics are areas of counter-establishment research, rather than conspiracy theories, and

including them in this chart would seem to contradict that claim. I include this chart to illustrate that not all conspiracy theories are on the same level of harmfulness.

My research is not explicitly about truth or untruth, rationality or irrationality; rather, it asks questions about how counter-establishment areas of research function. I am not myself a researcher of these topics; I am not consulting with primary source resources as many of my interviewees do. I do not claim to be an expert on these areas of research, as many of my interviewees are. This project seeks to develop an understanding of researchers who *are* experts, their methodologies, and their self-perception as researchers. This introduction will give a brief history and background to each of the topics.

I. JFK Assassination Research

During the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I would motivate myself to get out of my apartment by walking to adjacent neighborhoods in search of their Little Free Libraries (LFLs)—small, wooden, cabinet-like structures with glass doors that contained free books. Of course, these so-called “libraries” are not really libraries—for libraries themselves are not merely places to obtain books; they are community spaces offering a variety of services to patrons.³⁰ And although Little Free Libraries the nonprofit bills itself as giving access to books in neighborhoods that may not have a public library, I also noticed that I had to walk into wealthier neighborhoods to find more of them. My normal route takes me to seven LFLs within a two-mile radius of one another. In the yearslong pandemic, I have found three books relating to the Kennedy Assassination in one or the other of these LFLs—*A Cruel and Shocking Act: The Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination* (2013) by Philip Shenon, *Post Mortem: The Classic Investigation of the JFK Assassination Medical and Ballistics Evidence and Cover-Up* (2007) by Harold Weisberg, and *Who Shot JFK? A History Mystery* (1992) by Susan Landsman. That I was able to find these books—all three of which are decidedly different approaches to the subject, the first published by

³⁰ Jane Schmidt and Jordan Hale, “Little Free Libraries®: Interrogating the Impact of the Branded Book Exchange,” *Journal of Radical Librarianship* 3 (2017): 14–41.

Picador, the second by an independent publisher (authored by an early notorious critic of the Warren Commission Report) and the third a book geared towards children—speaks to the ubiquity and variety of books on the assassination.

It seems to be a requirement for books written about conspiracy theories in general—conspiracy theory scholarship—to at least mention the assassination, so synonymous is it with American conspiracy theories. Michael Butter uses the assassination as an example of his argument that conspiracy theories are false by definition: “The assumptions of conspiracy theorists in terms of size and scope alone make [proving conspiracy theories true] impossible. Thus, while it is perfectly conceivable that it will one day be proven beyond all doubt that a second gunman and others were involved in the assassination of John F. Kennedy, such a straightforward scenario will never be enough to satisfy the conspiracy theorists.”³¹ Butter goes on to posit that conspiracy theorists require large, significant explanations and would not be satisfied with anything less than a CIA- or mob-involved conspiracy. In his pop-psychology book about conspiracy theories, *Suspicious Minds*, Rob Brotherton cites multiple psychology studies done about JFK assassination conspiracy belief: that viewing Oliver Stone’s *JFK* instilled generalized distrust in the government,³² or that examining a “mixed bag” of evidence provided by researchers only strengthened whichever belief, pro– or anti–lone gunman theory, that they had about the assassination coming in.³³

Generally, accounts of the assassination either fall in line with the Warren Commission’s conclusion, that Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone assassin and not involved with a larger plot, or they contend that something larger was at work: either Oswald was a pawn, or he was consciously involved in a bigger conspiraassdfcy. In this section, I will first go through the official account of the assassination, and then the myriad unofficial versions and how they are uniquely tangled up within one another.

³¹ Michael Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*, trans. Sharon Howe (Medford, MA: Polity, 2020).

³² Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories*, 57.

³³ Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories*, 230.

The Official Narrative

It is almost impossible to study conspiracy theory without discussing the Kennedy Assassination. Beyond being a historically significant event, it kicked off the American fervor for conspiracy theorizing and lay research. The six seconds captured on film by Abraham Zapruder—and subsequently mythologized to a breathtaking degree—have been examined and re-examined by many researchers, both professional and amateur.³⁴ The official story goes that on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, Lee Harvey Oswald shot John F. Kennedy as his motorcade passed, from a sniper's roost in the Texas Schoolbook Depository. Oswald then fled, fatally shooting Officer J.D. Tippitt as he did, and then hid in a movie theater where he was apprehended and arrested. Two days later, as Oswald was being transferred from city to county jail, he was killed by Jack Ruby. On November 29, President Lyndon Johnson convened a commission, headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren, to investigate the assassination—having suspected, immediately, a conspiracy by virtue of the covert operations the Kennedy Administration was involved in regarding Fidel Castro.³⁵ The Warren Commission, after months of hearing expert and witness testimony and reviewing lengthy reports from the Secret Service and FBI, released a report in September of 1964 claiming, “The Commission has found no evidence that either Lee Harvey Oswald or Jack Ruby was part of any conspiracy, domestic or foreign, to assassinate President Kennedy.”³⁶ Much attention was paid in the report to Oswald's character, his political beliefs (a communist, he had defected to Russia and then back to the United States), and his disaffection.

The Warren Report was a flawed, enormous, and prodigiously detailed document that became integral to any and all research and speculation around the event: to this day, pro- and anti-Warren Report is the primary dichotomy around which much discussion of the assassination operates. The Report was published on September 27 of 1964. *The New York Times* printed it as a 48-page supplement the following day, and it was published as a paperback that sold several million copies and stayed at the top

³⁴ Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 76.

³⁵ Kathryn Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 113.

³⁶ Knight *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*, 82.

of the bestseller list for weeks. Ten weeks later, twenty-six volumes of evidence and testimony were published.³⁷ The remainder of the evidence consulted by the Warren Commission now lives at the National Archives and the Library of Congress, most of which is available to the public. The National Archives houses over five million pages of assassination-related documents.³⁸

Philip Shenon, in his thorough investigation of the assassination, *A Cruel and Shocking Act*, blames the Warren Commission's flawed investigation on Warren himself: the mistakes made by the Commission, which even those who agree with its conclusions admit to, were a result of Warren's control. He was more interested, according to Shenon, in protecting Kennedy's legacy than finding out the truth of his death.³⁹ Some scholars suggest that it was the flawed nature of the Warren Report that allowed conspiracy theories to flourish around the assassination.⁴⁰ As would come out in subsequent congressional inquiries, the CIA and the FBI were actively concealing information from the Commission throughout its ten month-long investigation in an attempt to hide the fact that they had known Oswald posed a risk.⁴¹ The CIA went to exhaustive lengths to conceal its various plots to assassinate Castro (which included teaming up with the mob in Havana). Allen Dulles, member of the Warren Commission and former CIA director, never told his fellow commissioners about these plots.⁴² Also contextually important is Kennedy's anger at the CIA for the Bay of Pigs disaster and his questionable decision to appoint his brother, Robert F. Kennedy, Attorney General. Together, the brothers more than doubled the number of major CIA covert operations.⁴³ Further, the Report accepted, uncritically, J. Edgar Hoover's sworn affidavit that Oswald did not work for the FBI, supporting it merely by naming other high-ranking officials who agreed with Hoover.⁴⁴ Olmsted suggests that "Hoover made up his mind within hours of the

³⁷ Peter Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 47.

³⁸ Philip Shenon, *A Cruel and Shocking Act: The Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination* (New York, NY: Picador, 2015), 13.

³⁹ Shenon, *A Cruel and Shocking Act: The Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination*, 13.

⁴⁰ Milan Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracies: How Delusions Have Overrun America*, 212.

⁴¹ Shenon, *A Cruel and Shocking Act: The Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination*, 11.

⁴² Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 126.

⁴³ Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2008), 207.

⁴⁴ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 51.

assassination that it would be best for the country—and not incidentally, for himself and the FBI—to conclude that Oswald had acted alone.” Hoover ensured that he and the FBI were appearing to cooperate fully with the Warren Commission at the same time that he consulted with internal watchdog agents to determine what sorts of mistakes were made by the FBI in regards to keeping an eye on Oswald, whose potential as a threat was known to the FBI.⁴⁵ Oswald’s portrayal as a “left-wing nut” suited Hoover’s goals as well, as he had spent the prior decade propagating anticommunist conspiracy theories.⁴⁶

Knight suggests that the Warren Report displays “a curious mixture of publicity and secrecy.” I have similarly referred to *access/secrecy*, an organizational logic employed by government archives in which they simultaneously provide access to collections and selectively maintain secrecy around them.⁴⁷ The Warren Report’s attitude towards the information it was releasing was always at least partially focused on public relations, as there was a significant public demand for information surrounding the case, and rumors from a variety of sources were circulating. The Commission spent a significant amount of time and effort combating the theories that were beginning to spread.⁴⁸ All of the interviews conducted and much of the other evidence consulted by the Warren Commission was classified, to remain so for seventy-five years so as to avoid parts of testimony being taken out of context: “The task of the inquiry was thus as much about managing the release of information as it was about digging up that information in the first place.”⁴⁹ With an eye towards public relations and quelling conspiracy theories and rumors, the Warren Commission did not perform its truth-seeking duties to the degree desired by the interested public. This set up a strained and combative relationship between counter-establishment Kennedy researchers and the government that persists to this day.

⁴⁵ Shenon, *A Cruel and Shocking Act: The Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination*, 151.

⁴⁶ Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 114.

⁴⁷ Yvonne M. Eadon, “(Not) Part of the System: Resolving Epistemic Disconnect Through Archival Reference,” *Knowledge Organization* 47, no. 6 (2020): 441–60, <https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-2020-6-441>.

⁴⁸ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 46.

⁴⁹ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 46.

Though the Warren Report is the most famous and definitive official narrative about the assassination, the event was analyzed in a variety of other governmental committees in subsequent years. The Clark Panel was convened by US Attorney General Ramsey Clark in early 1968, partly in response to popular books by Warren Report critics like Josiah Thompson and Mark Lane. Though the panel's conclusions were in line with the findings of the Warren Commission (released in 1969 during New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's trial of Clay Shaw), the panel did find that "Kennedy's brain and slides of tissue samples were nowhere to be found in the National Archives (almost certainly the Kennedy family had ordered them to be removed)."⁵⁰ The person who discovered that the brain was missing, pathologist Dr. Cyril Wecht, is one of my interview participants.

In the 1970s, two significant committees were convened by Congress. The U.S. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (known colloquially as the Church Committee, named for its chairperson) was convened in response to the Watergate revelations. Among the 15 reports released by the Church Committee was the 1976 report *The Investigation of the Assassination of President J.F.K.: Performance of the Intelligence Agencies*, released in 1976 and colloquially known as the Schweiker-Hart Report for its authors. The report made public the intelligence agencies' less-than-forthcoming activities with the Warren Commission's investigation.⁵¹ The CIA's plan to assassinate Castro, and its efforts to hide that plan from the Warren Commission, came to light as a result of the Church Committee hearings. In Olmsted's words:

The American state...paid a very great price when its leaders decided to hide the political context of the assassination. High government officials—Lyndon Johnson, J. Edgar Hoover, and Earl Warren—did in fact carry out a conspiracy, though not one so often attributed to them. It was a conspiracy to hide the truth about U.S. policy toward Cuba, and thus to obscure the historical context and the meaning of the assassination. Through their conspiracy, these dedicated statisticians undermined the credibility of the state.⁵²

That report, combined with the first televised release of the iconic Zapruder footage in 1975, ignited public calls for a reopening of the case. Along with pressure from the Congressional Black Caucus, this

⁵⁰ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 68.

⁵¹ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 68-69.

⁵² Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 148.

resulted in the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA). The HSCA would review the assassinations of both Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and JFK. The committee conducted a two and a half-year long inquiry that included a two-day conference with critics of the Warren Report.⁵³ In March 1979, the report—12 volumes of hearings and appendices—was released.⁵⁴ Though the report concluded that both assassinations were not the result of a U.S. government conspiracy and that Oswald and James Earl Ray were indeed guilty, the committee *did* ultimately conclude that there was a conspiracy to assassinate JFK and that there may have been one around King’s assassination. Of course, these conspiracies did *not* involve the U.S. government⁵⁵ (why would they? It’s not as though, ten years prior, the FBI had indeed conspired to assassinate Black Panther Fred Hampton⁵⁶); rather, it involved, they speculated, anti-Castro Cubans or the American mob.⁵⁷ The two mob members mentioned in the report would die violent deaths before they could be interviewed.⁵⁸

How did such a reversal occur? The HSCA report largely corroborated the Warren Report, but a last-minute introduction of a new piece of evidence changed its ultimate conclusion. This piece of evidence was a dictabelt, a low-quality recording device, from a nearby police motorcycle:

After a detailed preliminary scientific analysis (by the firm that had worked on the Watergate tapes) that suggested the possibility of shots coming from more than one direction, the dictabelt was then sent to another set of experts who conducted an even more elaborate statistical analysis, and the results of that second investigation were received by the HSCA just before it was about to finalise its report. The experts testified that there was a 95 per cent probability—that is, beyond a reasonable doubt—that there had been four shots, and that one came from the ‘grassy knoll’, as the sloping area of lawn in Dealey Plaza was quickly dubbed by assassination critics who suggested it was the true location of the fatal shot. In its final version the HSCA report concluded that there were four shots, one of which came from the grassy knoll, and hence there were two shooters...⁵⁹

⁵³ Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 169.

⁵⁴ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 69.

⁵⁵ “Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations of the U.S. House of Representatives,” August 15, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/research/jfk/select-committee-report/summary.html>.

⁵⁶ Jeffrey Haas, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther* (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 2019).

⁵⁷ Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 170.

⁵⁸ Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*, 89.

⁵⁹ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 70.

Despite the expertise used in the analysis of the dictabelt, the conclusion of the HSCA was later debunked by a percussionist from an Ohio rock band who listened to a reproduction of the dictabelt recording that came as an insert from a girlie magazine (interestingly, many JFK assassination theories circulated in these magazines, because they were treated as “political pornography” by the mainstream media). He played it over and over again for months until he heard an echo of a voice saying, “Hold everything secure until the homicide and other investigators can get there.” This was Sheriff Bill Decker, and he was evidently speaking after the assassination had occurred. Therefore the dictabelt recording was *not* a recording of the assassination shots. This finding from an amateur researcher was confirmed by a 1982 National Academy of Sciences investigation.⁶⁰ The impact that amateur researchers had on JFK assassination narratives cannot be overstated.

Counter-Establishment Narratives

Indeed, lay researchers have been involved in dissecting this case from its earliest days. Three months after the assassination, Shirley Martin drove herself and her three children from Oklahoma to Dallas in order to interview witnesses. Wealthy, Beverly Hills–based Maggie Field and Philadelphia lawyer Vincent Salandria started to build separate newspaper archives to track what was being reported about the assassination. Lillian Castellano discovered a possible vantage point for a second shooter (a storm drain) after studying photos of Dealey Plaza. Sylvia Meagher, a researcher for the World Health Organization, created an annotated index of all journalistic and governmental responses to the assassination. Among many others, these figures were early, pre–Warren Report researchers of the JFK assassination case who believed in a government conspiracy and subsequent cover-up. They also believed that, as a grassroots research community, they could themselves discover and expose the wrongdoings of those in the highest echelons of the United States.⁶¹ Non-academic, “lay” researchers and their networks have thus been an integral part of the story of the Kennedy Assassination from the very beginning. Josiah

⁶⁰ Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 170.

⁶¹ Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 112.

Thompson, author of the book *Six Seconds in Dallas: A Micro-study of the JFK Assassination* (1967) and part of the early (but not “first generation”) group of lay assassination researchers, was quoted in a 1967 *New Yorker* article as saying, in reference to work on the assassination, “It’s just like scholarship... There are good scholars and bad scholars. There are even analytical scholars and inductive scholars. But the marvelous thing about it is that there are no credentials. There’s no Ph.D. in the assassination. It’s pure scholarship. You have to make your own credentials.”⁶² In the article, Calvin Trillin goes on to examine and characterize the JFK assassination research community as it stood in 1967, years after the Warren Report but before Jim Garrison’s indictment of Clay Shaw that same year.⁶³ Thompson also conveyed frustration with lacking resources: “...the frustration of the thing is that you don’t really have the resources to do it right. With the same kind of resources the government had on this, maybe you could wrap it up. You shouldn’t have to rely on such fortuitous circumstances that this lead would only come because of a lucky break.”⁶⁴ Thus, we can see that even in early research ecosystems, lay researchers expressed frustration with the secrecy tactics employed by the government. Thompson, at least, seemed to feel both liberated and constrained by his counter-establishment status.

Even Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, harbored serious doubts about the veracity of the Warren Report, allegedly telling friends and journalists off the record that he believed there was a conspiracy involved in the assassination⁶⁵ and that the anti-Castro plots led directly to Kennedy’s assassination.⁶⁶ Of course, as in *JFK*, some theories include him as one of the conspirators. At various points and in various scenarios, the CIA, the FBI, the Secret Service, Castro himself, Cuban exiles, the military-industrial complex, Aristotle Onassis, and organized crime and the mafia have been brought into the fold as possible players in the conspiracy.

⁶² Calvin Trillin, “Was Lee Harvey Oswald Innocent?,” *The New Yorker*, June 2, 1967, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/06/10/the-buffs>.

⁶³ Shenon, *A Cruel and Shocking Act: The Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination*, 514.

⁶⁴ Trillin, “Was Lee Harvey Oswald Innocent?”

⁶⁵ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 68.

⁶⁶ Olmsted *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 126.

Jim Garrison, a New Orleans District Attorney, had opened an investigation into the assassination a year prior in 1966. Widely considered to be bungled, this investigation was portrayed sympathetically in Oliver Stone's notorious film *JFK*. Garrison harassed two New Orleans gay men, Clay Shaw and David Ferrie, the latter of whom was found dead in the company of suicidal notes—though the coroner ruled out foul play or suicide. An article in *Newsweek* suggested that Garrison had engaged in illegal tactics, including bribery, in order to tie the two men together for his “flimsy” case. Shaw, indicted by Garrison in 1967, would be acquitted two years later after less than an hour of jury deliberation.⁶⁷ In Peter Knight's words, “Both Garrison and his conspiracy theories were widely discredited as the work of an egomaniac with political ambitions (a smear campaign not without its own conspiratorial interpretations), and the upper hand once again returned to the advocates of the lone gunman theory.”⁶⁸

Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK* incited a new and intense flurry of research into the assassination and the figures around it. The film was criticized even prior to its release for blending documentary-style footage with real footage and speculative, acted-out scenes; Stone claimed that this was a stylistic choice that “deliberately foregrounds the issue of representation” through a postmodern approach that upends traditional cinematic viewing. In direct contradiction to his purported postmodernist approach, Stone presents the Zapruder film as sacrosanct evidence in the film. Kevin Costner's Jim Garrison plays and replays the frames where Kennedy's head snaps back in the courtroom, pointing out to the jury that Kennedy moves “back and to the left,” which, to him, would be an impossible result of a bullet coming from the Texas Schoolbook Depository. For Knight, this is among many moments in the film that betray Stone's “residual naïve faith in the power of images to speak for themselves and tell the truth.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, Stone stated that he was less concerned with the historical inaccuracies in his film and was instead motivated by a desire to create a myth that would counter the Warren Report's account in its narrative staying power. At this, he was ultimately successful. *JFK* shows Garrison finding out more and

⁶⁷ Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 519.

⁶⁸ Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files.*, 88.

⁶⁹ Knight, *The Kennedy Assassination*, 157.

more about an enormous conspiracy to kill Kennedy that involves the Mafia, the CIA, Lyndon B. Johnson, the Secret Service, and other players, either in the conspiracy to kill the President or in the subsequent cover-up. The film also posits that Oswald was framed for Kennedy's assassination.⁷⁰ *JFK's* framing of Kennedy as a tragic figure and his death as a fall from grace and loss of innocence for the nation has a through line that can be felt to this day in discussions of Kennedy's presidency, his assassination, and the loss of a potential future that did not include such an unrepentant Vietnam War, nor such violent responses to the uprisings of the Civil Rights Movement.

As a result of the fervor around this film, the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992 (JFK Records Act) would be signed into law. The JFK Records Act established the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Collection, mandating that all records relating to the assassination be consolidated at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and made available to the public. The Act also stipulated that an impartial board, the Assassination Records Review Board (ARRB) would oversee the collection of records relating to the assassination from federal, state, and local agencies that were involved in the investigation of the President's assassination.⁷¹ The ARRB, in conjunction with these agencies, was also responsible for determining which records would be postponed from being released to the public, to be held in a protected collection at NARA.⁷² Approximately 1% of the Collection remains classified to this day. This Collection, along with all of the Congressional Committee investigations summarized in the previous section, has resulted in an superabundance of evidence for JFK assassination researchers to pore over. To Peter Knight, this means that "...the problem is not that there is too little evidence to solve the case. On the contrary, there is now far too much information to allow anyone, whether critic or apologist for the Warren Commission, to encompass and account for, with reasonable certainty, all the contradictory and varied pieces of the

⁷⁰ Oliver Stone, *JFK* (Warner Bros., 1991).

⁷¹ Assassination Records Review Board, "The Problem of Secrecy and the Solution of the JFK Act," in *Government Secrecy: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2009).

⁷² Assassination Records Review Board, 255.

puzzle.”⁷³ So many details exist—about Oswald’s movements in the months and years before the assassination (especially in Mexico City), the clandestine operations of the CIA (especially in its anti-communist activities), and the moment-by-moment occurrences in Dallas in those few days in late November 1963—that it seems almost impossible to form a clear picture of what ultimately happened.

The JFK assassination is a historical event; a cultural touchstone in the American imaginary; a myth; a collection of disparate narratives; a coalescing of national identity-through-records. Ultimately, it is an illustration of the commitments and disappointments we make and remake as a country, and how researchers perceive themselves (as establishment, quasi-establishment, or counter-establishment) as individual researchers and as part of a community of research.

II. UFOs: The Truth *Must* Be Out There

Like the literature surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the literature on ufology (the study of UFOs) is vast. This dissertation project began with a focus on Roswell; I expanded my recruitment of interviewees beyond Roswell after realizing that some UFO researchers consider that topic to be somewhat passé, and that many of the big names in Roswell research, like Stanton Friedman, have passed on. Furthermore, I wanted to expand the purview of my research slightly beyond the United States context to get a sense of the international UFO field, as well as how North American ufological communit(ies) are viewed from the outside.

It is important to note that the UFO phenomenon and the research culture that has developed around it over the course of the 20th century is not in and of itself conspiratorial. Rather, the related idea that the government has covered up extraterrestrial contact is the “conspiracy theory” at play here. Not all ufologists allege a government conspiracy, and not all purport that the UFO phenomenon is indeed extraterrestrial in nature. This area of counter-establishment research is highly epistemically and methodologically diverse. Such a diversity of approaches further illustrates the efficacy of the use of

⁷³ Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*, 93.

terms like *counter-establishment research*—not all counter-establishment researchers allege a conspiracy, though some do.

Ufology, in the words of one of the participants in this study, Thomas E. Bullard, from his monograph, *The Myth and Mystery of UFOs* (2010), is “slippery and amorphous;” the field has “uncertain boundaries,” meaning that those who study sighting reports, Roswell researchers, psychologists who work with abductees, and those who believe that an alien base exists under Dulce, New Mexico, may all be considered ufologists. Bullard goes as far as to state that “A consensus is so rare among people who identify themselves as ufologists that ufology is more nearly synonymous with the sum of UFO beliefs than with anything like a well-defined academic discipline.”⁷⁴ Jodi Dean, on the other hand, argues that ufology, while it is often mocked for its deep divides, does not in reality exhibit much more discord than institutionally accepted academic disciplines.⁷⁵

Ufologists often reproduce the same pattern that has pushed their area of study to the fringes: distancing legitimate scientific inquiry from less legitimate approaches. In Christopher Roth’s words, much of “Ufology...has had to monitor its own folkloric and religious assumptions and strive for more scientific objectivity, hampered by the fact that the wider society, including academia, regards ufology’s very premise as folklore.”⁷⁶ The self monitoring and objectivity striving Roth refers to, rather than just being *hampered* by the attitudes of establishment academia, is explicitly shaped by it. Without the tense relationship with mainstream academia, serious/scientific ufologists may not need to constantly perform their separateness from other, less-academic styles of inquiry. Further, Dean reminds us that counter-establishment claims of any kind are expressly political because of the inherent tension with mainstream academia and because they are making truth claims: “Because of their claims to truth, alternative sciences have political interconnections and repercussions, particularly in democratic societies that claim to value

⁷⁴ Thomas E. Bullard, *The Myth and Mystery of UFOs* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2010). 14-15.

⁷⁵ Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 55.

⁷⁶ Christopher F. Roth, “Ufology as Anthropology: Race, Extraterrestrials, and the Occult,” in *ET Culture: Anthropology in Outerspaces*, ed. Debbora Battaglia (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 38–92.

open discussion or in scientific circles that credit themselves with being objective, interested only in evidence.”⁷⁷ Examining how mainstream science and media treat the topic of UFOs tells us as much about the epistemic commitments of the mainstream as it does about the topic itself.

Pilot Kenneth Arnold’s legendary sighting of odd flying objects moving “like saucers skipped over water” took place in June 1947. Only a month later, something mysterious crashed in the desert near Roswell, New Mexico. That year kicked off the first of three waves of UFO sightings in the United States; later, it would be revealed that the military began its own investigations into the UFO phenomenon, a matter of national security, the same year.⁷⁸ Although there were waves of sightings that occurred pre-1947, the communications industry played a marked role in intensifying and publicizing the wave that would occur after Arnold’s sighting.⁷⁹ The media’s sensationalizing of Arnold’s sighting of nine discs going at impossible speeds over Mount Rainier, particularly in using the term “flying saucer,” has been derided in some ufological circles as cheapening an otherwise momentous moment in the history of UFOs.⁸⁰

Beyond being the most well-known UFO incident in the United States, Roswell illustrates the interconnectedness of UFOs, ufology, the media, and the government. The Roswell Army Air Field put out a press release that described “a disc” that had crashed on a ranch and was taken in and inspected by Major Jesse Marcel.⁸¹ Picked up by national media, the press release was notoriously walked back hours after its release, with military authorities citing issues of national security. One day later, another one was put out, claiming that the recovered object was a weather balloon—it has been alleged that it may neither

⁷⁷ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 6.

⁷⁸ Milan Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracies: How Delusions Have Overrun America*, 206.

⁷⁹ Brenda Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

⁸⁰ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 33.

⁸¹ As quoted by Don Berliner and Stanton T. Friedman, *Crash at Corona: THE U. S. Military Retrieval and Cover-Up of a UFO* (New York, NY: Paraview, 2004), xiii

have been a wholly harmless weather balloon nor an alien spacecraft, but instead part of a secret military project.⁸²

Reports of crashed extraterrestrial crafts were not taken seriously by the UFO research community⁸³ prior to the “rediscovery” of Roswell as a topic of interest in the 1980s and 1990s when a frenzy of research into the topic occurred. In 1978, ufologist and nuclear physicist Stanton Friedman interviewed Jesse Marcel, who accompanied the crash material from Roswell to Fort Worth, Texas.⁸⁴ In 1980, the first book on the subject, authored by Charles Berlitz and William Moore (with Friedman as a research consultant), was published: *The Roswell Incident*. This book put forth the theory that an extraterrestrial aircraft was observing nuclear weapons testing happening at the Roswell Army Air Field when lightning struck, causing the crash and killing the aliens. Inevitably, a government cover-up followed.⁸⁵ In the book, Jesse Marcel described the material he interacted with as “nothing that came from earth,” saying that “when he held ‘a cigarette lighter to some of this stuff...it didn’t burn’ and that some small pieces would ‘not bend or break.’ He also noted that some material was imprinted with pictorial symbols he described as ‘hieroglyphics.’” Marcel also said that thin sheets of metal were so strong that they could not be dented by a sledgehammer.⁸⁶

UFO Crash at Roswell, by Donald Schmitt (whom I interviewed for this dissertation) and Kevin Randall, added dozens of new witnesses, as well as new details concerning where the alien bodies were taken and by whom they were seen. Stanton Friedman and Don Berliner published *Crash at Corona* in 1992 in which they interviewed still more witnesses and alleged that there were two crashed saucers and eight alien bodies.⁸⁷ Charles A. Ziegler traces the morphing of the Roswell “myth” in six versions, from 1980–1994. In 1994, Steven Schiff, a New Mexico congressional representative, requested that the Air

⁸² Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*.

⁸³ Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs*, 21.

⁸⁴ Berliner and Friedman, *Crash at Corona: The U. S. Military Retrieval and Cover-Up of a UFO*, 9.

⁸⁵ Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 184.

⁸⁶ Benson Saler, Charles A. Ziegler, and Charles B. Moore, *UFO Crash at Roswell: The Genesis of a Modern Myth* (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 16.

⁸⁷ Berliner and Friedman, *Crash at Corona: THE U. S. Military Retrieval and Cover-Up of a UFO*.

Force and other governmental agencies conduct a search for files about Roswell. After a yearlong investigation, 1,000 pages of files were released which indicated that there had never been any coverup of a crashed extraterrestrial craft. The mainstream media published these findings, but they were not accepted by the UFO community: the report was widely treated as evidence of a continuing cover-up.⁸⁸

The association of UFOs with extraterrestrials did not become rote until the early 1950s:⁸⁹ The Air Force initially approached the sightings as though they were probable Soviet experimental aircraft.⁹⁰ Deborah Battaglia points out that the context of the Cold War—the dual possibility of destruction and utopian progress offered by nuclear energy—is not only contextually informative for nascent ufology, but that it continues to undergird ufological discourse to this day.⁹¹ Some individuals who claimed to have been contacted by extraterrestrials in fact related warnings from the aliens that humans needed to stop creating atomic weapons.

The Air Force's Project Sign produced an unofficial report in 1949, concluding that UFOs did not in fact present a national security threat. The report also concluded that while most UFOs were of terrestrial origin, some number of them could have been extraterrestrial. The report was rejected due to lack of evidence for the claim.⁹² To investigate further, Project Grudge replaced Project Sign later that year: the Cold War was warming up and anything aerial that was mysterious or unknown had to be investigated by the military.⁹³ Project Grudge was, from the outset, an entirely different approach to the phenomenon: the project's final report waged a PR campaign that put forth the notion that almost all, if not all, UFOs were the result of hoaxes and witnesses who wanted to believe in extraterrestrial life.⁹⁴ Project Grudge then produced a 600-page report which suggested that UFOs could be misperceptions,

⁸⁸ Saler, Ziegler, and Moore, *UFO Crash at Roswell: The Genesis of a Modern Myth*, x.

⁸⁹ Roth, "Ufology as Anthropology: Race, Extraterrestrials, and the Occult," 41.

⁹⁰ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 35.

⁹¹ Debora Battaglia, "Insiders' Voices in Outerspaces," in *E.T. Culture: Anthropology in Outerspaces* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–37. 20.

⁹² Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs*, 12.

⁹³ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 35.

⁹⁴ Sidney Shalett, "What You Can Believe About Flying Saucers," *Saturday Evening Post*, April 30, 1949.

mass-hysteria, hoaxes, and/or psychopathology.⁹⁵ This backfired to some degree, however: “Together with poor record keeping and an obsession with secrecy that produced a steady accumulation of half-facts and hesitations, the official ridicule heaped upon witnesses had a reverse effect: suspicions that there really was something to hide. Despite military efforts to dismiss UFOs, to assimilate them into something controllable and scientifically explicable, by May 1950 sighting reports were at an all-time high.”⁹⁶ Once again, as with the Warren Commission, the Cold War context prompted the government to attempt to control the flow of information. These attempts at control ultimately produced the impression that the government was working overtime to conceal something. The access/secrecy logic comes to the fore again, but this time, we see that giving access to poorly kept records is not really giving access at all.

Project Grudge gave way to Project Blue Book, the most famous of these three Air Force projects. The project was active from March 1952 to December 1969.⁹⁷ Project Blue Book is a long project about which entire books have been written⁹⁸ and TV shows made, so I will concentrate on its work during the 1960s.⁹⁹ Dr. J. Allen Hynek—who began as a skeptic but went on to found the Center for UFO Studies and mentor to two of my interviewees—was a consultant on the project and a professor at Northwestern University. In 1966, Hynek suggested that a widely publicized Michigan sighting in which eighty seven women at Hillsdale College saw “a glowing, football-shaped object hover over their dorm, fly around, and dodge airport lights” was caused by swamp gas. Many, including those at the *New Yorker*, found this explanation silly.¹⁰⁰ Despite this, it seemed that Project Blue Book took the phenomenon more seriously than the preceding project.

⁹⁵ Michael D. Swords, “UFOs, the Military and the Early Cold War Era,” in *UFOs and Abductions: Challenging the Borders of Knowledge*, ed. David M. Jacobs (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 97.

⁹⁶ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 36.

⁹⁷ “Public Interest in UFOs Persists 50 Years After Project Blue Book Termination,” National Archives, December 4, 2019, <https://www.archives.gov/news/articles/project-blue-book-50th-anniversary>.

⁹⁸ Brad Steiger, *Project Blue Book: The Top Secret UFO Findings Revealed* (Newburyport, MA: MUFON Books, 2019).

⁹⁹ *Project Blue Book*, Drama, Mystery, Sci-Fi, Thriller (IMN Creative, A+E Studios, Compari Entertainment, 2019).

¹⁰⁰ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 37.

After unsuccessfully attempting to pass Project Blue Book on to another agency, the Air Force decided to contract with universities. They approached several universities, including Harvard, MIT, and Caltech, but only the University of Colorado took them up on the offer. The other universities did not want to damage their academic or scientific credibility by looking into such a fringe subject, but the University of Colorado found the \$500,000 Air Force funding to be tempting after a round of vicious budget cuts.¹⁰¹ The University of Colorado study would become another milestone in the history of ufology as both the apex of the government's publicly known UFO investigation¹⁰² and the point at which the academy fully and finally rejected ufology. In an internal memo, Assistant Dean Robert Low suggested that in order to approach the topic "objectively...one has to admit the possibility that such things as UFOs exist." However, admitting such a thing would not be "respectable," and "The simple act of admitting these possibilities just as possibilities puts us beyond the pale, and we would lose more in prestige in the scientific community than we could possibly gain by undertaking the investigation." Low's solution to the issue would be that the study be conducted entirely by "nonbelievers" whose objective would be to disprove the phenomenon:

The trick would be, I think, to describe the project so that, to the public, it would appear a totally objective study but, to the scientific community, would present the image of a group of nonbelievers trying their best to be objective but having an almost zero expectation of finding a saucer. One way to do this would be to stress investigation, not of the physical phenomena, rather of the people who do the observing—the psychology and sociology of persons and groups who report seeing UFOs.¹⁰³

It is no wonder that ufologists may be skeptical of academics wanting to study them: this government-sponsored, academic study masqueraded as a study of UFO phenomena. In actuality, in the tradition of Project Grudge (but perhaps with a bit more finesse), the study examined the psychology of ufologists, and in so doing continued the practice of epistemic othering. The study was unable to identify 30% of the

¹⁰¹ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 37.

¹⁰² Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs*, 15.

¹⁰³ As quoted by Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 38.

100 sighting cases examined yet still concluded that ufology was not a worthy area of study. This report led directly to the dismantling of Project Blue Book.¹⁰⁴

At the same time as these military-sponsored inquiries, grassroots UFO research groups began to establish themselves across the United States: The Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO) was founded in 1952. In 1956, Major Donald Keyhoe founded the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP), and "...to add legitimacy and clout to his organization, Keyhoe tried to recruit prestigious scientific, military, and political leaders for its board of directors. The group focused its attention on collecting and investigating UFO sighting reports and on pressuring Congress to hold hearings in which the air force would be expected to give a public accounting for its data."¹⁰⁵ As NICAP was becoming a thing of the past, MUFON, which started as the Midwest UFO Network and later became the Mutual UFO Network, was founded in 1969. The monthly *MUFON UFO Journal* peaked in the early 1990s with over 5,000 subscribers.¹⁰⁶ In 1973, Dr. J. Allen Hynek founded the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS). His book, now a classic of ufology literature, had been published the year prior and introduced the "Close Encounters" system for assessing sightings and encounters with extraterrestrials.¹⁰⁷ He was the director of CUFOS from 1973 until his death in 1986, at which point Mark Rodeghier (whom I interviewed) succeeded him. The website states that "The Center for UFO Studies continues to honor Hynek's legacy through its serious study and examination of the UFO phenomenon."¹⁰⁸

During these decades, another trend emerged: people claiming to have interacted with extraterrestrials in some fashion. A particular type of experiencer during the 1950s and 1960s was known as a *contactee*. The first of these was George Adamski, a Polish immigrant and amateur astronomer who saw and lectured on his UFO sightings in the 1940s and early '50s. On November 20, 1952, he

¹⁰⁴ Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs*, 16.

¹⁰⁵ Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs*, 17.

¹⁰⁶ Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs*, 18.

¹⁰⁷ "J. Allen Hynek Center for UFO Studies: About," Center for UFO Studies, accessed April 1, 2021, <http://www.cufos.org/org.html>.

¹⁰⁸ "J. Allen Hynek Center for UFO Studies: About," Center for UFO Studies, accessed April 1, 2021, <http://www.cufos.org/org.html>.

encountered a small UFO and spoke with its “beautiful” humanoid occupant.¹⁰⁹ He published books about the experience in the following years, including details of his trips to Venus (the aliens’ home world), in which he had deep conversations with them about their religion and philosophy. The “Space Brothers” message to humanity was one of peace: they had managed to live in peace and they encouraged humans to do the same. Adamski gained many loyal followers, and other contactees cropped up after him. The typical contactee narrative involved spontaneously meeting a humanoid alien, often riding in a spaceship, and having repeated discussions with the aliens about humanity as a whole. Often, the extraterrestrials issued warnings about nuclear weapons that the contactee was to disseminate widely.¹¹⁰ Some contactees developed followings, forming notorious UFO cults and religions¹¹¹ which would later form the likes of Heaven’s Gate, Raëlianism, and Scientology.

Contactees thus introduced a new, more religious, mystical aspect to UFOs. For many scientifically minded researchers, this development represented a step backward in their attempts to garner legitimacy.¹¹² It produced a schism within the UFO community. Some scientifically oriented ufologists publicly suggested that contactees were motivated by their own greed for the money that could be made from books and speaking engagements.¹¹³ Contactee groups also initiated a relationship between the UFO community and academia, but not of the kind that ufologists wanted: contactee groups had very public newsletters and meetings and were thus an easy way for social scientists to study the UFO community. The larger UFO community, of course, did not feel that such studies were representative.¹¹⁴

Another type of contact would begin to emerge in the 1960s and ’70s: that of the alien abduction. This era in UFO history can be traced to the Barney and Betty Hill case. The couple claimed to have been abducted by aliens in September of 1961. The Hills, an interracial couple, reported that while driving through an isolated part of the White Mountains, they saw a UFO trailing their car. It approached their

¹⁰⁹ Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs*, 41.

¹¹⁰ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 40.

¹¹¹ J. Allen Hynek, *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Study* (Kindle Edition, 2019), 12.

¹¹² Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 40.

¹¹³ Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs*, 44.

¹¹⁴ Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs*, 45.

car, they felt drowsy, and then recovered and made it home. After arriving home, they realized they had lost two hours of time. Reporting the sighting to NICAP, they were interviewed by an investigator.¹¹⁵ In the ensuing months, Betty Hill developed an interest in UFOs and read every book on them she could. Barney, on the other hand, wanted to forget about the experience and developed health issues that doctors had no success treating.¹¹⁶ The couple was referred to the psychiatrist Dr. Benjamin Simon, who hypnotized them in multiple separate sessions, in which they revealed, independently of one another, what happened during their period of lost time. The Hills reported being experimented on by the occupants of the craft they saw, including having a needle inserted into Betty Hill's navel and their skin shavings and nail clippings collected. They reported being treated well, however: "rather as humans might treat experimental animals."¹¹⁷ In 1966, John G. Fuller published *The Interrupted Journey* about the case, and it became extremely well known in the United States. Critics suggested that Betty Hill's extensive reading about UFOs primed her, but it doesn't wholly explain the fact that the two relayed the same or a very similar story to Simon.

Abduction cases that followed the Hills' reproduced many of the elements seen in that case, including missing time, memories—usually recovered using hypnosis—of being examined by aliens aboard the UFO, conversing with the aliens, and touring the ship.¹¹⁸ Further, abduction sometimes ran in families and would recur throughout abductees' lives.¹¹⁹ Hypnosis thus became a research tool at ufologists' disposal,¹²⁰ although some ufologists remained skeptical of abduction cases as a whole.¹²¹ Also

¹¹⁵ Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs*, 48.

¹¹⁶ Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs*, 49.

¹¹⁷ Hynek, *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Study* (Kindle Edition, 2019), 211.

¹¹⁸ Mark Rodeghier, "Hypnosis and the Hill Abduction Case," *International UFO Reporter* 19, no. 2 (1994): 4–6, 23–24.

¹¹⁹ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 46.

¹²⁰ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 49.

¹²¹ Denzler 197; One interesting example of both of these things (skepticism of both hypnosis and abductions), can be found in Alvin H. Lawson's 1979 article in the *Journal for UFO Studies*, "Hypnosis of Imaginary UFO 'Abductees.'" The first few sentences of the abstract read: "In an attempt to evaluate objectively the claims of UFO 'abductees,' imaginary abductions were induced hypnotically in a group of volunteers who had no significant knowledge of UFOs. Eight situational questions comprising the major components of a typical abduction account were asked of each subject. Although the researchers expected major dissimilarities, an averaged comparison of data from four imaginary and four 'real' abduction narratives showed no substantive differences."

of note: contactee experiences were often positive for the experiencer, whereas abduction experiences had a negative valence for those abducted.¹²² Battaglia suggests that approaching abduction as a liberating experience of disembodiment is “to take the path of mass suicide cults liberated once and for all from their earthly bodies: abduction (not to be confused with benign contact) is categorically detrimental to human well-being.”¹²³ Over the 1980s and 1990s, hypnosis was an important tool for UFO investigators who worked with abductees. It is important to note that in the 1980s, the moral panic(s) about Satanic ritual abuse relied heavily on recovered memories, often through hypnosis, just as abduction research did.¹²⁴

The Hills’ credibility made ufologists question the division they had set up between *sighting* cases and *occupant* cases.¹²⁵ Since the 1970s, a significant amount of study has been done on abductees from within the UFO research community as well as some from non-ufology researchers in psychology and social science. As the abduction phenomenon continued to grow in the 1980s, serious-scientific ufologists started involving themselves in abduction research, some moving away from tracking the material, technological presence of UFOs and toward “practices of hypnosis and readings of the body” in the search for the truth about UFOs and extraterrestrials. By the 1990s, ufology had developed what Dean terms “advocatory conventions,” which now include abductees as well as sighting witnesses: “Taking them seriously, trusting the words of everyday people, now means allowing for the truth of alien abduction.”¹²⁶

At the same time, not all ufologists accepted abduction research, particularly the methodological validity of hypnosis. Debates about hypnosis and the concomitant reality or unreality experienced by abductees occur throughout the run of the Center for UFO Studies’ *Journal of UFO Studies (JUFOS)*, a

¹²² Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 46.

¹²³ Battaglia, Debhora Battaglia, “Insiders’ Voices in Outerspaces,” in *E.T. Culture: Anthropology in Outerspaces* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–37, 13.

¹²⁴ Brown, Bridget Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves: The History and Politics of Alien Abduction* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2007), 40.

¹²⁵ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 49.

¹²⁶ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 46.

peer-reviewed journal active from 1979 through 2006. Of the 164 full-length articles, book reviews, literature reviews, introductions, and short form “issues forum” debates, 43, or 26.2%, deal directly with abductions and/or hypnosis as a topic. Authors take a variety of positions on the subject. Bullard wrote in 1989 that while hypnosis is a flawed method, this does not mean that abductees’ experiences are necessarily false.¹²⁷ In the same issue, in an “issues forum” on abductions, psychologist Robert A. Baker posits that “there is no concrete evidence establishing beyond a reasonable doubt that any of the many UFO abduction claims is true...”¹²⁸ Stuart Appelle more gently suggests that “Although there is no reason to doubt that these memories are anything but subjectively real to the abductees, there are reasons to remain uncertain about their objective accuracy.”¹²⁹ Many ufologists writing in this journal thus displayed a measure of skepticism about abduction cases while maintaining curiosity about the phenomenon. The sustained discussion of abduction cases within the UFO research community is a perfect example of ufology’s parallels with academia: as a discipline, it takes abduction seriously by studying it and debating it, with individual researchers performing their own credibility through criticism and skepticism.

As we have seen from this short account of the history of ufology, the discipline is deeply concerned with questions of evidence, truth, trust, and credibility. Ufology as a “fringe” or “alternative” discipline must constantly reflect on itself, endeavoring to be objective and striving for a scientific approach.¹³⁰ This is, of course, shaped by both academia’s treatment of the discipline as pure folklore or mythology¹³¹ and by the “less serious” factions of the UFO community being the most visible to the outside world. Dean argues that ufology operates within and around two distinct discourses, the scientific and the governmental-judicial. “Serious” UFO research groups and individual researchers established

¹²⁷ Thomas E. Bullard, “Hypnosis and Abductions: A Troubled Relationship,” *Journal for UFO Studies* 1 (New Series) (1989): 3–40.

¹²⁸ Robert A. Baker, “Q: Are UFO Abduction Experiences For Real? A: No, No, A Thousand Times No!,” *Journal for UFO Studies* 1 (New Series) (1989): 104–10.

¹²⁹ Stuart Appelle, “Reflections on Reports of Being Abducted By UFOs,” *Journal for UFO Studies* 1 (New Series) (1989): 127–29.

¹³⁰ Roth, “Ufology as Anthropology: Race, Extraterrestrials, and the Occult,” 38–93.

¹³¹ Saler, Ziegler, and Moore, *UFO Crash at Roswell: The Genesis of a Modern Myth*.

themselves within these discourses in order to, on one hand, convince scientists to study the UFO phenomenon, and on the other, to exert influence on the government so that it might release relevant information.¹³² She goes on to suggest that, because official research carried out by the government emphasized how unreliable witnesses were, UFO researchers worked to demonstrate the trustworthiness of witnesses in response, resulting in UFO discourse as a whole being determined by “...questions of trust and credibility as much as around empirical evidence.”¹³³ In another sense, this was all they could do—as Bullard put it in his interview with me, “getting a UFO in the lab is not all that easy.” This also established a symbiosis of sorts between official and/or skeptical explanations of phenomena and ufological accounts. Thomas Milan Konda denotes this as a type of conspiracism, “cover-up conspiracism,” which he suggests is tautological syllogism:

Beginning with the belief that UFOs are truly extraterrestrial, the authorities’ rejection of that belief automatically constitutes a cover-up of the truth. As part of this cover-up, the authorities must offer some non-truth (the ‘official position’) in place of the truth. This merely strengthens the conspiracist’s belief in the first ‘real truth’ (UFOs are extraterrestrial) and adds to it a second, conspiratorial real truth (the government knows the first real truth and is lying about it.)¹³⁴

The way Milan Konda talks about this, however, reveals his own inherent trust in the government—in his view, trusting the government to reveal information is the “right” viewpoint. Yet, the thousands of documents that had been released under the Freedom of Information Act (requests submitted over the years by UFO activists)¹³⁵ by the late 1990s showed that the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the Defense Intelligence Agency had continued to keep an eye on UFO phenomena; military pilots also saw, over and over again, UFOs whose flying patterns seemed to be impossible. These documents indicated, then, that government agencies and the military had indeed been concealing and covering up their decades-long interest in UFOs.¹³⁶ As with the withholding of information around the JFK assassination, there was, indeed, a true government conspiracy to withhold information about UFOs.

¹³² Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 39.

¹³³ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, 39.

¹³⁴ Milan Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracies: How Delusions Have Overrun America*, 207-8.

¹³⁵ Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves: The History and Politics of Alien Abduction*, 110.

¹³⁶ Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs*, 22.

III. Missing 411: Strange Disappearances in the Wilderness

There is much less scholarship about Missing 411 than either Ufology or the JFK assassination. Missing 411 is largely, if not completely, the work of one man, David Paulides. Paulides, a former police officer¹³⁷ and a bigfoot researcher, started noticing anomalies in wilderness missing persons cases around 2009. Since 2012, he has written and self-published ten books on the topic, conducting research by interviewing families of people who disappeared, searching through newspaper archives, and submitting hundreds of FOIA requests.¹³⁸ Paulides claims that the genesis of his research occurred when he was approached by an off-duty park ranger who “...felt I was the perfect individual to research an issue that he had known concerned him for many years...a series of missing people inside our national parks. The ranger stated that the events were very unusual, many people were never found, and the park service was doing everything possible to keep a lid on the publicity surrounding the missing.”¹³⁹ Paulides has done an extensive amount of research: he claims to have cataloged around 1200 cases of missing individuals (who go missing under mysterious circumstances in the wilderness) in his books.¹⁴⁰

The legality surrounding cases of missing persons is remarkably confusing, and how a person is searched for depends significantly on where they went missing. According to Jon Billman, journalist, author of *The Cold Vanish: Seeking the Missing in North America's Wildlands*, and interviewee for this dissertation, procedures for searching for people who disappear in the wilderness is significantly different from those who go missing from urban areas. “All bets are off when you disappear in the wild. While big national parks like Yosemite operate almost as sovereign states with their own crack search-and-rescue teams, go missing in most western states and...statutes that date back to the Old West stipulate that you

¹³⁷ Sarah Emerson, “How America’s National Parks Became Hotbeds of Paranormal Activity,” *Vice*, October 28, 2017, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/gyjvdx/missing-persons-national-parks-paranormal-bigfoot-aliens>.

¹³⁸ Emerson, “How America’s National Parks Became Hotbeds of Paranormal Activity.”

¹³⁹ David Paulides, *Missing 411 Western United States and Canada: Unexplained Disappearances of North Americans That Have Never Been Solved* (self-published, 2011). ix.

¹⁴⁰ David Paulides, Strange disappearances in national parks and forests: the ‘Missing 411’ phenomena, interview by George Knapp, January 23, 2020, <https://www.mysterywire.com/mysteries/strange-disappearances-in-national-parks-and-forests-the-missing-411-phenomena/>.

are now the responsibility of the county sheriff. And it matters a great deal where inside those states you fall off the map.” Your race, class, and gender also matter, as with all aspects of law enforcement, though Billman does not mention that. Missing persons cases are hyper-local, with almost no federal guidelines or standards in existence. Billman goes on to quote a ranger working in a 377,000-acre park who sometimes discovers missing persons cases in the local newspaper. For many missing persons cases involving the wilderness, communication channels have not broken down so much as they have never existed.¹⁴¹

Despite being a bigfoot researcher, David Paulides does not make any claims about the cause of these disappearances beyond the notion that they are all connected. George Knapp, a Las Vegas television journalist and frequent host of *Coast to Coast AM* who is well known for his investigations of UFO reports, interviewed Paulides in 2019. In that interview, Paulides talked about his hesitancy to assign a cause to the phenomenon:

Thousands of people have written to me over the years and they’ve said, “Dave, one thing we really like about you is you don’t theorize. You don’t hypothesize. And you don’t go off on wild junctures.” I will say that, if there was an answer, I would be the first one to come out and say it. I think there’s a lot of questions that need to be answered. But right now, there’s no concrete one item that you can say, this is causing that. And because of no tracks, no scent trail, no witnesses to these events, we’ve had people say, “Well, it’s got to be UFOs. It’s got to be reptilians. It’s got to be Bigfoot. It’s got to be this.” In reality, I don’t think you can say it’s just one thing. And because of that, I’m very careful about what I do.¹⁴²

By refusing to name a cause, Paulides is at once creating more mystery and intrigue around the topic and ensuring that any claims he makes cannot be disproven. He also seems to tacitly endorse the idea that it is perhaps not one supernatural cause, but multiple supernatural causes.

In this interview, Paulides also goes into detail about what makes a case anomalous enough to include in Missing 411:

And when I talk about it, I explain that there’s 15,000, 20,000 missing person cases throughout the world that I’ve looked at and just breezed over, but they don’t fit the profile really of what

¹⁴¹ Jon Billman, *The Cold Vanish: Seeking the Missing in North America’s Wildlands* (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2020), 134.

¹⁴² David Paulides, Strange disappearances in national parks and forests: the ‘Missing 411’ phenomena, interview by George Knapp, January 23, 2020, <https://www.mysterywire.com/mysteries/strange-disappearances-in-national-parks-and-forests-the-missing-411-phenomena/>.

we're looking at...And after those cases have been filtered through, you come up with certain "profile points" I call. And it's similar to what the FBI does in profiling a criminal case. We're profiling missing persons cases to find those common elements that are unusual, that seem to fit the specific category we've refined.¹⁴³

Here, he legitimizes his own work by comparing his process to that of the FBI (he readily aligns himself with law enforcement agencies, but not with other governmental agencies and institutions, as we will see) as well as illustrating how many cases he has reviewed in total—indeed a formidable amount. *Missing 411: Western United States and Canada* reads largely like a database or list of missing persons; it is written in a dry, just-the-facts style reminiscent of police reports. The book is organized first geographically and then by year, with photos of some of the missing individuals accompanying their stories. Paulides will sometimes allude to articles he has read or searched for,¹⁴⁴ but there are no citations whatsoever in his book. Following his writeups of cases that he finds particularly anomalous, he includes a section entitled "Case Summary." Rather than summarizing the case, these sections most often highlight aspects of the cases that are odd or similar to other cases, patterns he sees, including "suspicious circumstances related to berries,"¹⁴⁵ missing children turning up, alive or not, seemingly impossible distances for them to travel from where they disappeared, and people going missing in and around boulder fields.

Paulides also discusses the frustrations he's faced with FOIA requests to the National Park Service (NPS). Speaking specifically about the Stacy Arras case, he says: "Fact: Stacy Arras was not listed in any database as a missing person. Fact: The NPS has denied me all access to the case file. I'm not a great believer in conspiracy theories, but why has this case been withheld from the public? What is it in Stacy's case file that the NPS does not want released to the public? It would appear that the NPS has

¹⁴³ David Paulides, Strange disappearances in national parks and forests: the 'Missing 411' phenomena, interview by George Knapp, January 23, 2020, <https://www.mysterywire.com/mysteries/strange-disappearances-in-national-parks-and-forests-the-missing-411-phenomena/>.

¹⁴⁴ Paulides, *Missing 411 Western United States and Canada: Unexplained Disappearances of North Americans That Have Never Been Solved*, 9.

¹⁴⁵ Paulides, *Missing 411 Western United States and Canada: Unexplained Disappearances of North Americans That Have Never Been Solved*, 29.

kept Stacy's case out of public view for 30 years. Why?"¹⁴⁶ At the end of the book, he goes into more depth about what he has faced during his FOIA process:

Early in my FOIA process, I requested a list of all missing people inside the NPS system...Since I was a published author of two books, I requested an author's exemption for the costs associated with the FOIA...I was told my books were not in enough libraries to qualify for the author's exemption. I spent a week looking for this qualification in any FOIA literature and found none. This was an arbitrary act on the part of an NPS attorney to force me to pay for all FOIA inquiries, *and an obvious move to dissuade me from asking for missing person information.* The NPS responded by stating that they *do not* track missing people. They do not keep missing people lists at any location; thus any list would have to be developed from scratch. (my emphasis).¹⁴⁷

While he lauds the FBI by comparing his own methods of profiling to theirs, Paulides is open about his frustration with and suspicions about NPS. A couple of paragraphs later, he goes on to say that he believes that NPS is falsely claiming that they do not possess the data he is asking for, and "...the data they possess would shock the average American citizen." He then alleges that the reason NPS is hiding information is because people would not visit national parks if they knew the extent of the missing persons problem within them, and thus NPS would lose money.¹⁴⁸

Evidently, Paulides strongly believes in an NPS conspiracy to hide data about missing persons in North American national parks. Though I do not like to make truth claims about whether a given conspiracy theory is true or not, this one is particularly difficult to believe for a couple of reasons. First, the budget for NPS has remained the same for the past twenty years (\$2.5 billion per year); it is one of the most chronically underfunded agencies, with a \$12 billion dollar maintenance backlog.¹⁴⁹ Its underfunded status makes it difficult to imagine that there is a comprehensive secret database of missing persons, due to the effort and money it would take to collect that data, and the effort it would take to keep it secret.

¹⁴⁶ Paulides, *Missing 411 Western United States and Canada: Unexplained Disappearances of North Americans That Have Never Been Solved*, 121.

¹⁴⁷ Paulides, *Missing 411 Western United States and Canada: Unexplained Disappearances of North Americans That Have Never Been Solved*, 351.

¹⁴⁸ Paulides, *Missing 411 Western United States and Canada: Unexplained Disappearances of North Americans That Have Never Been Solved*, 350 - 351.

¹⁴⁹ Alvin Powell, "Report Looks into U.S. National Parks Budgeting Woes," *Harvard Gazette*, September 23, 2019, sec. National & World Affairs, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/09/report-looks-into-u-s-national-parks-budgeting-woes/>.

Paulides has also made two documentaries about Missing 411 since 2017, *Missing 411* (2016) and *Missing 411: The Hunted* (2019), which focuses on the disappearances of hunters. In *Missing 411*, Keith Parkins, who disappeared in the 1950s as a toddler and turned up several miles away from where he vanished, shows the camera all the clothes he was wearing as a young child. They look, except for small tears in his overalls, pristine. The 60-year-old clothing has an archival quality, serving as a record of his disappearance and survival. In both documentaries, clothes, and the way they behave, are often treated as evidence either in their presence or their absence. *Missing 411* also chronicles the disappearance of DeOrr Kunz Jr., a two year old who disappeared without a trace while on a family camping trip in rural Idaho. Several people make the point that, were DeOrr to have been snatched by a bear, his loose boots would likely have fallen off, or there would have been some other trace of clothing found. The remains of Jaryd Atadero, who disappeared at three years old in 1999 in the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forest in Colorado, were found by hikers four years later in an area that had been thoroughly searched. In *Missing 411*, Jaryd's father shows his clothing to the camera, saying, "the clothing was sent to the CBI, The clothing was tested by the CBI. No mountain lion hairs, no blood, nothing on any of the articles of clothing. If a mountain lion would have attacked him, they go for the stomach area. This jacket would've been in shreds. I've been told by several people, mountain lion experts in the woods, this jacket would not have survived a mountain lion attack, period" (See figure 2). He then goes to show his son's shoes:

These are the actual shoes. These are Jaryd's shoes that were found up on the mountain. I've been told by experts that they do not look like they've been in the wilderness for three and a half years. The other interesting thing about the shoes is you would think that if a mountain lion is dragging his body up a mountain, and dragging him like this (see figure 3), you would see marks on his shoes. And there are no marks here. You would think that if he were dragging him this way up the mountains [backwards], not only would you see marks, but it would have pulled his shoes off way before the area where they found him.

Clothes are used by multiple people as records of disappearances; a way of illustrating what happened or what did not happen; ultimately, a record of strangeness and unknowability.



Fig. 1.2, Allyn Atadero shows his son's jacket that was recovered near his remains.

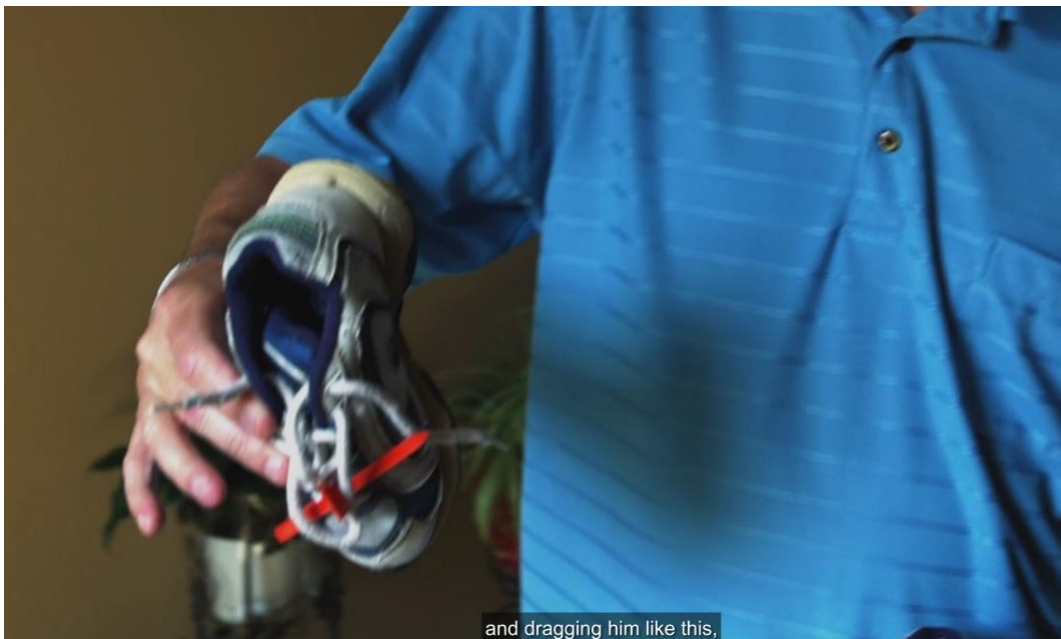


Fig. 1.3, Allyn Atadero shows his son's shoes, recovered a ways away from Jaryd's body and the rest of his clothes.

Dr. Heidi Streetman of Regis University appears in *Missing 411* to discuss government accountability. Her status as a professor is highlighted in the documentary, with her identifying feature being “college professor.” She says, “As someone who’s been an avidly outdoorsperson all my life, it just is unthinkable to me that there’s no accountability from our government, when it’s easy to be accountable, especially in this day and age of technology...sometimes records are kept, and sometimes records are not kept. There’s no requirement for the federal government to keep records of people who go missing on federal lands.”¹⁵⁰ Streetman put together a petition, which as of November 2021 has a little over 12,000 signatures. The petition, which Paulides promotes on his website, advocates for a publicly available, centralized, searchable database for people who go missing in the wild:

Currently, there is no centralized registry or database of persons who have gone missing in our national parks and forests or on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands. If search and rescue parties are unable to locate the missing, no records are required to be kept by our government about the missing person case or the circumstances surrounding the event. When remains of the missing are found, again, no records are required to be maintained. Often, attempts to acquire information regarding the missing are blocked by bureaucratic red tape and/or demands for exorbitant fees. It is time to demand that a national, publicly accessible registry/database be created in which all missing persons are accounted for in our national parks and forests and on BLM lands. The purpose of this would be to make the government accountable for keeping track and reporting of the missing, to inform the public of the facts surrounding missing persons cases on public lands, as well as keeping account of all missing individuals and the circumstances under which they went missing on public lands.¹⁵¹

The petition text makes notes of the points at which the government purports to not keep records; the points at which archival silences occur. The goal of this petition is to fix or fill these archival silences with publicly available records. Jon Billman points to a failed attempt by the Department of the Interior to keep track of law enforcement cases across NPS, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This database, called the Incident Management Analysis and Reporting System, cost \$50 million and is so impractical that the Department of Fish and Wildlife refuses to even try to use it. In Billman’s words, “That leaves the mathematical prognosticating

¹⁵⁰ *Missing 411*, documentary, 2016, 58:27

¹⁵¹ “Sign Petition: MAKE THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR ACCOUNTABLE FOR PERSONS MISSING IN OUR NATIONAL PARKS & FORESTS,” accessed November 6, 2021, <https://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/910/113/575/>.

to civilians and conspiracy theorists. People like David Paulides.”¹⁵² Where there is absence, silence, mystery, and unknowability, there will be exploration by lay researchers.

Early on in *Missing 411: The Hunted*, Paulides highlights the profile points he has discerned that make him think a particular case belongs in the Missing 411 canon. These include: point of separation (an individual was separated from their friends at a specific point); canines have difficulty tracking the person; they end up being found in an area that was previously searched; missing clothing; disappearance happened during a weather event, near water, and/or in and around a boulder field; the missing person had a disability or illness; the coroner determined an unknown cause of death; and cases are clustered geographically in the same regions.¹⁵³ Paulides’ map of the geographical clusters of missing persons, which appears in the first few pages of his book, has made the rounds on the Internet as compared to a map of cave systems in the U.S. (figure 1.4).

¹⁵² Jon Billman, *The Cold Vanish: Seeking the Missing in North America’s Wildlands*.

¹⁵³ *Missing 411: The Hunted*, documentary, 2019, 00:22.



Figure 1.4, two maps compared to one another: the top, *Paulides Missing 411 map*, the bottom, supposedly a map of U.S. cave systems.¹⁵⁴

Chuck Sutherland, a blogger and cartographer, analyzes the maps and is unsure where the data is coming from, as it does not match up with the data he is familiar with, as provided by USGS. The fact-checking website Snopes.com concludes that the map is a “mixture” of true and false, with the maps being accurate to what they say they are portraying, likely being correlative rather than causative—the disappearances are by definition in national parks and wildlands, which happen to contain many cave systems.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Chuck Sutherland, “Chuck Sutherland: Missing People Map,” *Chuck Sutherland* (blog), January 23, 2020, <http://chuck-sutherland.blogspot.com/2020/01/missing-people-map.html>.

¹⁵⁵ “Does Map of Missing Persons in US Match Up with Cave Systems?,” Snopes.com, accessed December 30, 2021, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/missing-persons-cave-maps/>.

As mentioned previously, Paulides does not want to make any claims about what could be causing the disappearances: the closest he comes is implying that it may be several paranormal things working together. Other figures in *Missing 411* make similar claims about broad-strokes paranormal causes: survivalist and wilderness expert Lee Stroud, with whom Paulides works closely, said of the Keith Parkins case, “It’s the kind of baffling case that has you sit back and go—nothing that I can put my finger on in a normal set of circumstances in the wilderness makes any sense in this case whatsoever. It’s something *other*.” The wilderness is essentially a large area of *otherness*, in which it is conceivable in our imaginations that something paranormal, something *other*, could lurk. Stroud implies that this thing is beyond even his comprehension or understanding as someone with wilderness expertise. Further, Dr. Streetman states, of all the cases: “When you look at some of these cases, you have to consider possibilities with which we are really uncomfortable as a rational society. We are really uncomfortable thinking about what else could be out there, but some of these situations are so unusual that you have to think beyond the bounds of what’s ‘normal,’ what’s a ‘normal’ explanation for this.” Going beyond the normative and into the paranormal is what Paulides and the others he works with are asking us to do—Streetman’s suggestion that we are uncomfortable with explanations that are not rational suggests that, as a society, we must consider and wrestle with our own tendency to view the world only through our human understanding, which has been warped by the structures of Enlightenment ideals of rationality.

I chose *Missing 411* to be part of this project partly because it is a newer area of research. As I spoke with my interviewees, I began to realize that it exists both online and off—in the wilderness and the woods, off the grid, and, at the same time, embedded within certain online communities. It also seemed to me to be somewhat archival in the sense that each missing persons case must be investigated using existing records. However, this research itself is done by Paulides and not really by anyone else—*Missing 411* is largely the work of one researcher, and I was not able to speak with him to ask him about his research. I am including our email exchange below, as it sheds some light on his attitude towards institutions:

Dear Mr. Paulides,

Hello! I am a UCLA PhD candidate in Information Studies, and part of my dissertation project has to do with how people research the Missing 411 phenomenon (overall, my dissertation is about the research practices of researchers who look into alternative topics that have been labeled by some as 'conspiratorial,' and how we might bridge the gap between information institutions and such researchers). As you are the founder and voice of the movement, it would be *beyond* fantastic if you have time to sit down (virtually) with me for an interview about Missing 411 and your own research practices around the topic. Please let me know if this is something you would be interested in, and I will send some more information about the study. Thank you so much for your time.

Warmly,

Yvonne

Yvonne

You have greatly misinterpreted our research and the people who contribute.

We took a specific path to avoid theories and allow readers to develop their own hypothesis. Nobody can label us in the conspiracy theory bracket because we've never offered a theory. To fling the term "conspiracy" is demeaning to any research and marginalizes the work product.

We wish you luck in your thesis, we will not be participating.

The mere *mention* of the word "conspiratorial" indicated to him that I had "greatly misinterpreted" his research, despite the fact that he does allege a conspiracy on the part of NPS in his books. Part of my methodology necessitates indicating that word *somewhere* in my recruitment so that my participants are not blindsided when I ask them questions about the term, nor when part of my dissertation talks about the work that has been done in the realm of conspiracy theory scholarship.

David Paulides' website also offers a wealth of information about his orientation towards the wider public, authority, and his own work. It immediately evokes the aesthetics and design of many homemade websites that could be found on the web 1.0 internet. Alternatively called the CanAm Missing Project and Missing 411, the "home" tab leads only to a page with a single sentence: "The first website dedicated to understanding the complexity and issues of searching, rescuing and investigating people

missing in the wilds throughout the world.”



Figure 1.5: Homepage of the CanAm Missing Project/ Missing411.

Clicking on the hyperlink where his books are sold will redirect the user to “nabigfootsearch.com.” Jon Billman interviewed Paulides for his book *The Cold Vanish*. In his interview with me, Billman described mentioning Bigfoot to Paulides: “I mentioned Bigfoot, you know, he's a famous Bigfoot personality...he was a Bigfoot researcher before he ever published anything about Missing 411...And so I, it's logical to me, I can mention Bigfoot, and he got really excited or kind of, um, kind of frustrated about me mentioning Bigfoot.” If he does not want his Bigfoot association to be made explicit, then why continue to have the books sold on that website? Paulides seems to be drawing implicit boundaries around himself and his work with Missing 411 and attempting to distance himself from his previous work with Bigfoot by refusing to name it outright. Like serious-scientific ufologists, this may be due to the ridicule faced by Bigfoot researchers from academia and the wider public, which has been widely documented.¹⁵⁶ Yet, he retains ties to the Bigfoot world, featuring Bigfoot researchers in his Missing 411 documentaries without denoting them as such.

If a user goes to Paulides' website, the following appears on the purchase pages of his books:

¹⁵⁶ Laura Krantz, “Wild Thing,” 2018, <https://anchor.fm/wildthing/episodes/Episode-2-Distant-Relatives-or-Kissing-Cousins-e2oknc/a-a7mugu>.

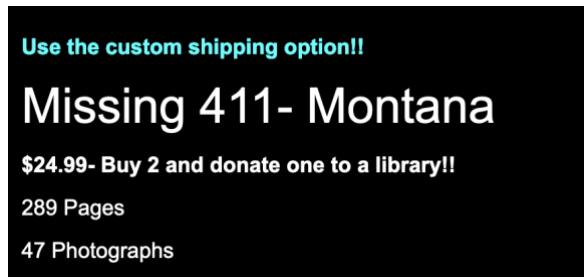


Figure 1.6: A screenshot from the separate website where Paulides' books are for sale.

As we saw above, Paulides was told by a FOIA official that his books were not in enough libraries for him to qualify for an author's discount. Is this his way of countering that statement, gaining a wider readership, or both? Donating a book to a library does not guarantee its circulation; librarians reserve the right to add donated books to their collections, sell them, or dispose of them according to their own discretion.

Just as with ufology and the JFK assassination, much of the discourse around Missing 411 centers around information, absences of information, and governmental incompetence or willful negligence. Billman himself draws a similar parallel: "Arizona is a wild state and is number two in terms of the missing per capita. No one professes to know for sure how many people are missing in the Grand Canyon because the government doesn't keep those records—or, like UFO research, they're hiding them."¹⁵⁷ Despite this and other parallels, and the fact that Missing 411 plants itself as firmly counter-establishment, the topic is unquestionably at a different point in its development when compared with the other two topics of this dissertation. Paulides' work began in 2009, and he continues to be the face of Missing 411. The other two topics are much older, hailing from at least five decades prior, and have always been composed of researcher collectives rather than one leading researcher. Because I was not able to speak with Paulides about his work, the conclusions I draw about Missing 411 may be set apart slightly from those that I draw regarding JFK and UFO studies, both of which offered me opportunities to speak with researchers who were more heavily involved in defining the parameters of the field. I spoke with four Missing 411 researchers, and Billman was the closest I could find to someone who was deeply

¹⁵⁷ Billman, *The Cold Vanish: Seeking the Missing in North America's Wildlands*, 115.

involved in Missing 411 (and he was certainly a skeptic about the entire thing). The other three people I spoke to mainly browsed the Internet for content about Missing 411 for entertainment purposes. Despite this marked difference, Missing 411 continues to present an opportunity to analyze how people deal with incomplete information given by government authorities. In Billman's words, "Information is power, even when the world of missing persons seems so bereft of it."¹⁵⁸

This chapter introduced the notion of counter-establishment research topics and summarized the three topics I chose for this project and why I chose them. These summaries serve to give important context for the remainder of this dissertation. This chapter also illustrated how these topics interface with issues of information availability, unknowability, and silence(s). As we saw in all three areas of research, attempts by the government to control information flows to the public around particularly strange or notorious topics that stick in the public imagination tends to backfire, highlighting the failures of the government and casting suspicion upon it. These informational issues, along with the fact that interview participants for this project are researchers and thus deal in records, documents, and other sorts of informational sources, continue to show that the area of counter-establishment research is one that explicitly needs an information studies perspective, which this dissertation will provide. While this dissertation looks at information seeking practices of counter-establishment researchers, and thus it is out of scope to characterize the specific information ecologies of these topics, understanding the histories of these topics—in particular the relationships forged with science and the government—sheds light on the contexts within which counter-establishment researchers are seeking information.

¹⁵⁸ Billman, *The Cold Vanish: Seeking the Missing in North America's Wildlands*, 115.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review touches on two bodies of scholarship: information seeking and behavior (ISB) and the study of conspiracy theories. The first section on ISB will look at work done ranging from the 1970s to the present day, focusing on models, methodologies, and pathologies of information. This section will also look at information seeking in different contexts, including in archives and online. The second section examines conspiracy theory scholarship, definitions, and the history and state of the field. Scholarship on conspiracy theories comes from a variety of disciplines, including political science, psychology, sociology, philosophy, and cultural studies.

I. Information Seeking and Behavior

Models, Theories, Methodologies and Pathologies

Information seeking research exists squarely within the LIS discipline, branching into two distinct paradigmatic approaches: the Information Retrieval (IR) approach and the Information Seeking & Behavior (ISB) approach. The former predates the latter. Concerned with the system and its functionality, IR approaches often presume a straightforward query with a single answer that can be retrieved by a well-designed IR system.¹⁵⁹ ISB approaches were developed in response to this as a way to center the user and their needs, recognizing the complex cognitive processes involved in searching for information.

The development of the ISB perspective, which pulls from psychology and sociology, was in part a response to the machine-centeredness of the considerable literature on information retrieval. The ISB view upended how information was perceived and treated within information studies.¹⁶⁰ ISB perspectives

¹⁵⁹ Reijo Savolainen, “Berry picking and Information Foraging: Comparison of Two Theoretical Frameworks for Studying Exploratory Search,” *Journal of Information Science* 44, no. 5 (October 1, 2018): 580–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551517713168>.

¹⁶⁰ Kimmo Tuominen, Sanna Talja, and Reijo Savolainen, “Discourse, Cognition, and Reality: Toward a Social Constructionist Metatheory for Library and Information Science,” in *Emerging Frameworks and Methods: CoLIS*

started to consider the inner worlds of individual users and how those inner worlds shaped perceptions, behaviors, and search techniques. ISB research looks at the methods, contexts, affects, thoughts, and physical sensations that are associated with looking for information, from everyday activities (e.g., shopping) to formal research. This dissertation focuses on information seeking as research within information institutions and online.

Early work on information seeking and behavior still retained some of the more computationally focused features of IR. Many early theorists conceptualized information seeking as an activity in *uncertainty reduction*.¹⁶¹ Belkin introduced the notion of Anomalous States of Knowledge (ASKs) as the catalyst for information seeking.¹⁶² An ASK occurs when an individual recognizes, within their knowledge around a given topic, an anomaly (which Belkin says can be “inadequacies of many sorts, such as gaps or lacks, uncertainty, or incoherence, whose only common trait is a perceived ‘wrongness.’”¹⁶³). One of the main features of an ASK is an inability to articulate one’s information need(s) exactly—a phenomenon frequently navigated by reference personnel. This comparatively early information seeking model emphasizes uncertainty reduction and “non-specifiability.” ASKs may be a wholly different experience for counter-establishment researchers because of the role of anomalous experiences in conspiracy theory belief. Van Prooijen and Jostmann found that when individuals experience uncertainty, they make judgments about the plausibility or implausibility of a given conspiracy theory according to perceived morality.¹⁶⁴ One significant question this dissertation seeks to answer is whether or not counter-establishment researchers have a unique reaction to feelings of uncertainty that are inevitable in the course of the research process.

4 : *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Conceptions of Library and Information Science, Seattle, WA, USA, July 21-25, 2002*, ed. Harry Bruce and Raya Fidel (Libraries Unlimited, 2002).

¹⁶¹ Donald O. Case, *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior*, 3rd ed. (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Ltd, 2012), 82.

¹⁶² Nicholas J. Belkin, “Anomalous States of Knowledge as a Basis for Information Retrieval,” *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 5 (1980): 133–43.

¹⁶³ Belkin, “Anomalous States of Knowledge as a Basis for Information Retrieval,” 137.

¹⁶⁴ Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Nils B. Jostmann, “Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Influence of Uncertainty and Perceived Morality,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 43, no. 1 (2013): 109–15, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.1922>.

Exploratory search is a mode of search that illustrates the utility of ISB approaches: when a searcher is in the exploratory phase, they may search differently than when their searches become more focused. Bates' berrypicking model suggests that information seeking is a complex, multivariate process. She argues that users are constantly modifying their search terms and needs and that information is viewed as useful at different points in the search process. Rather than presenting a linear form of search (need → search → obtain), Bates uses berrypicking to identify a type of search consisting of numerous modes of searching coupled with continuously evolving user needs and goals. For Bates, "...this model of searching differs from the traditional one not only in that it reflects evolving, berrypicking searches, but also searches in a much wider variety of sources, and using a much wider variety of search techniques than has been typically represented in information retrieval models to date."¹⁶⁵ Just like berries in the forest, information is spread out, not grouped together. Search queries are ever-evolving, and users use a variety of techniques to find information.

Brenda Dervin's sense-making methodology is another significant theoretical milestone within the ISB subfield. Sense-making has its own history within other related fields, including Human-Computer Interaction, Cognitive Systems Engineering, and Organizational Communication,¹⁶⁶ but Dervin's sense-making comes specifically out of Communication and LIS. Informed by constructivist and cognitive metatheoretical assumptions, Dervin's sense-making methodology "...aims at freeing research from the implicit assumption that there is one right way to produce knowledge or to use information."¹⁶⁷ In proposing that individuals and reality exist in a semi-chaotic, semi-ordered world somewhere between modern and the postmodern, Dervin went against many widely accepted assumptions about information seeking, behavior, and communication. She reconceptualized the notion of information itself: from a

¹⁶⁵ Marcia J. Bates, "The Design of Browsing and Berrypicking Techniques for the Online Search Interface," 1989, 7.

¹⁶⁶ Brenda Dervin and Charles M. Naumer, "Sense-Making," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1081/E-ELIS4-120043227>.

¹⁶⁷ Reijo Savolainen, "Information Use as Gap-Bridging: The Viewpoint of Sense-Making Methodology," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 57, no. 8 (2006): 1116–25, <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.20400>, 1118.

static object external to the individual, transmitted linearly from without to within, to a concept, collapsed together with knowledge, that is designed internally by the individual.¹⁶⁸ In other words, Dervin’s sense-making treats the individual phenomenologically, assuming that each human has a unique experience of life and, accordingly, “...there are human differences in experience and observation.”¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, Dervin problematizes the idea that systems can comfortably interact with humans and accurately predict their behavior. Instead, she presents the notion that humans’ information needs are difficult to articulate, malleable, ever-changing, and predicated on internal and external contextual factors.¹⁷⁰ Sense-making is designed to function as a framework for both qualitative and quantitative research as long as it remains critical of systems and prioritizes and centers the experiences of the user.¹⁷¹ Importantly, too, Dervin’s sense-making takes socially constructed power dynamics into account, which can influence information seeking and use—particularly within the context of an information institution, structured as they are around expertise and authoritative systems of knowledge organization.

Sense-making methodology has developed over the decades since it was first introduced in the 1980s but is based on two main phenomenological space-time metaphors: step-taking and gap-bridging. The former refers to the idea that sense-making involves taking steps, moving forward and re-defining one’s context with each step, and sometimes retracing one’s steps to review previous knowledge.¹⁷² Dervin constitutes human life as being made up of a variety of “gap conditions” between individuals, times, spaces, and contexts. She suggests that communication is best studied in the context of such gap conditions, in part because “...it focuses on communicating as constructing, as gap bridging, offering for comparative analysis and application a perspective that is both fundamental and applicable across

¹⁶⁸ Brenda Dervin, “On Studying Information Seeking Methodologically: The Implications of Connecting Metatheory to Method,” *Information Processing & Management* 35, no. 6 (November 1, 1999): 727–50, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0306-4573\(99\)00023-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0306-4573(99)00023-0).

¹⁶⁹ Brenda Dervin and Lois Foreman-Wernet, *Sense-Making Methodology Reader* (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2003), 7.

¹⁷⁰ Naresh Kumar Agarwal, “Making Sense of Sense-Making: Tracing the History and Development of Dervin’s Sense-Making Methodology,” in *History Preconference*, 2012, 6.

¹⁷¹ Agarwal, “Making Sense of Sense-Making: Tracing the History and Development of Dervin’s Sense-Making Methodology,” 3.

¹⁷² Savolainen, “Information Use as Gap-Bridging,” 1120.

situations while at the same time pertinent to specific situations. Regardless of situational or historical context, all communicating entities (e.g., cultures and individuals in cultures) bridge gaps.”¹⁷³ Gap-bridging, as a way to think about communication and information seeking, can operate at scale: any time an individual or organization seeks information, they are bridging a gap of some kind.

In the 1990s, some critical scholars began critiquing these cognitive ISB models, suggesting that they lacked contextual and structural perspective. Bernd Frohmann suggests that:

A discourse of radical individualism, supported by polarizations of inner and outer, and of 'sense-making' as a radically individual act becomes ideological in a society...where 'information stores' and 'information needs' are constructed and contested on behalf of specific interests, and where image production and manipulation are highly politicized social practice.¹⁷⁴

Conceptualizing information seeking as an individual experience ignores the nuances of different informational environments, contexts, and experiences, as well as how information is packaged and organized in ways that both decontextualize and recontextualize it. We can see the effects of this hyper-individualist behavioral approach in the current struggles around the proliferation of misinformation—information is de- and recontextualized in a variety of environments.

Elfreda A. Chatman’s work theorizing the “impoverished life-world of outsiders” presents a conceptual framework for how groups and individuals treated as *outsiders* relate to perceived *insiders* when it comes to information seeking.¹⁷⁵ She differentiates insiders and outsiders according to differences in worldview:

In sharp contrast to an insider’s worldview, an outsider lives in a stratified life-world...That is, insiders’ lived-experiences are shaped by the fact that they share a common cultural, social, religious etc. perspective. It is these common experiences that provide expected norms of behavior and ways to approach the world.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Dervin and Foreman-Wernet, *Sense-Making Methodology Reader*, 64.

¹⁷⁴ Frohmann, Bernd. “The Power of Images: A Discourse Analysis of the Cognitive Viewpoint.” *Journal of Documentation* 48, no. 4 (January 1, 1992): 365–86. <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb026904>.

¹⁷⁵ Elfreda A. Chatman, “The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 47, no. 3 (1996): 193–206, [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1097-4571\(199603\)47:3<193::AID-ASI3>3.0.CO;2-T](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-4571(199603)47:3<193::AID-ASI3>3.0.CO;2-T).

¹⁷⁶ Chatman, “The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders,” 194.

Insiders, Chatman claims, have access to certain knowledge that outsiders do not. Insiders have a greater degree of knowledge about one another and the privileged information available perhaps only to them by virtue of their shared worldview. This serves to protect them from outside influences. Outsiders claim significant knowledge, Chatman says, "...because they are part of the large society, they have a more cosmopolitan view of the world and, therefore, easy access to its resources."¹⁷⁷ An insider lives in information poverty when they, as a result of self-protective instincts and actions, choose to ignore or avoid information that would be useful to them. Chatman's "theory of life in the round," based in ethnographic work in a women's maximum-security prison, introduces the notion that, within so-called "small worlds," subject to public scrutiny, individuals "will not cross the boundaries of their world to seek information" (unless the information is perceived as critical, consensus dictates that outside information is needed, and/or the life in the round is no longer functioning as it has been).¹⁷⁸

Counter-establishment researchers, particularly those who are part of research communities (such as those found on online forums, etc.), are decidedly insiders, because they share a particular worldview and knowledge that is disseminated within the community. Society at large excludes them from scientific and academic discourse by virtue of their worldview¹⁷⁹ and/or the topics they study. For insiders, "...our membership within a particular social group contributes to information poverty."¹⁸⁰ That is, membership within the counter-establishment research social group can make it more difficult to access informational resources, either because they are not trusted by the group or because they are not accessible to members of the group. In her conclusion, Chatman draws attention to the fact that information professionals need to recognize the information needs and practices of what she calls "other populations," making several generalized conclusions from the studies she has done with such groups: "...the world is one in which the information needs and its sources are very *localized*...it is one in which outsiders are usually not sought

¹⁷⁷ Chatman, "The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders," 195.

¹⁷⁸ Elfreda A. Chatman, "A Theory of Life in the Round," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 50, no. 3 (1999): 207–17, 214.

¹⁷⁹ Harambam and Aupers, "Contesting Epistemic Authority."

¹⁸⁰ Chatman, "The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders," 197.

for information and advice. And it is a world in which norms and mores define what is important and what is not.”¹⁸¹

Harambam and Aupers¹⁸² introduce a comparable framework for thinking about conspiracy theories as “the Other of science.” In an ethnographic study, they look at “...how [scientific discourse] boundaries are contested, negotiated, and re-defined by conspiracy theorists themselves. Social groups producing popular knowledge are, after all, neither passive nor powerless...Conspiracy theorists are aware of the boundary work done by scientists and of the stigma of being ‘bad scientists’ and ‘religious believers’ ascribed to them.”¹⁸³ The authors argue that conspiracy theorists operate, similar to many social scientists, within an interpretivist paradigm that questions the epistemic objectivity and authority of science. Conspiracy theorists “deconstruct the public front-stage image of science and want to reveal the social, economic, political powers that color its findings.”¹⁸⁴ Indeed, the counter-establishment researchers I spoke with—in particular ufologists, whose contentious relationship with science is clear—pointed out the shortcomings of science and scientific consensus repeatedly. Critique of science is not itself a bad thing, of course: counter-establishment critiques are treated markedly differently than criticisms by academically established sociologists of science. The relationships counter-establishment researchers have with *other* epistemic authorities, including information institutions, remains under-theorized.¹⁸⁵ Case describes two researchers, one of whom has a worldview that stipulates “it is not up to her to question the nature of power relationships in the world, but rather to investigate practical problems that face the institution for which she works.” The other researcher, by contrast, “...may feel compelled to challenge and expose what he judges to be an unfair social relationship—the failure of a government agency to provide the kind of services that most people need...”¹⁸⁶ These two researchers, even if they employ the same methodology, are operating under wholly different paradigms with different ontologies.

¹⁸¹ Chatman, “The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders,” 205.

¹⁸² Harambam and Aupers, “Contesting Epistemic Authority.”

¹⁸³ Harambam and Aupers, “Contesting Epistemic Authority,” 470.

¹⁸⁴ Harambam and Aupers, “Contesting Epistemic Authority,” 477.

¹⁸⁵ Eadon, “Useful Information Turned into Something Useless.”

¹⁸⁶ Case, *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior*, 168.

The first researcher's ontology is more in line with the epistemic construction of most information institutions, whereas the second researcher's perspective is more critical—indeed, they could easily be a counter-establishment researcher. Harambam and Aupers' findings echo Chatman's in the sense that the worldviews of outsiders (scientists and information professionals) and insiders (counter-establishment researchers and conspiracy theorists) are incommensurate. Yet, they also illustrate that conspiracy theorists (and arguably counter-establishment researchers) operationalize their worldview for the purposes of critiquing the outsider worldview.

In information studies, “relevance” refers to the degree to which a given informational resource meets a user's need(s).¹⁸⁷ IR has attempted to operationalize relevance as a quantifiable measure of how well search queries match retrieved information. In the 1970s, scholars began discussing “situational relevance,” or “pertinence,” which referred to the “subjective view of relevance [which] argues for the importance of the user's knowledge state and intentions at the time of encountering information.”¹⁸⁸ Related to this concept is the idea of *salience*: “Something that is salient ‘stands out,’ and is vivid, unexpected, notable, conspicuous, prominent, or ‘unpleasant, deviant, extreme, intense, unusual, sudden, brightly lit, colorful, alone’ (Kiesler & Sproull, 1982, 556)”¹⁸⁹ Salience can be a trigger for an individual to begin the information seeking process¹⁹⁰ and may be particularly significant for conspiracist researchers in the same way as anomalous states of knowledge might be. Johnson's model of information seeking¹⁹¹ introduces the notion of “personal relevance,” elements of which are *salience* and *preexisting*

¹⁸⁷ Case, *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior*, 105.

¹⁸⁸ Case, *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior*, 107.

¹⁸⁹ Case, *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior*, 108.

¹⁹⁰ Donald O. Case et al., “Avoiding versus Seeking: The Relationship of Information Seeking to Avoidance, Blunting, Coping, Dissonance, and Related Concepts,” *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 93, no. 3 (July 2005): 353–62.

¹⁹¹ J. David Johnson, *Cancer-Related Information Seeking* (New York, NY: Hampton Press, 1997).

beliefs about the research topic.¹⁹² Indirectly, personal relevance invokes experiences of information that have been labeled as “pathologies,” including information overload, anxiety, and avoidance.¹⁹³

Although we often think of acquiring information as a step in reducing the anxiety that accompanies uncertainty, in some cases it can in fact *increase* anxiety. *Information overload* refers to the idea that an individual (or system) may become overwhelmed by excessive stimuli, to the point that inputs can no longer be processed effectively.¹⁹⁴ Miller identified seven ways in which individuals, groups, systems or institutions may try to mitigate feelings of overwhelm that come with information overload: omission, or non-processing; error, processing information incorrectly; queuing, delaying processing of some information; filtering, processing only some information; “cutting categories of discrimination” or being less precise with processing; “employing multiple channels,” or processing through two or more channels, like multitasking; and finally, escape.¹⁹⁵ Information overload “...is usually associated with a loss of control over the situation...”¹⁹⁶ Beyond the fact that the amount of information extant in the world has grown exponentially over time, the causes of overload are myriad—although the advent of personal computing and other digital information and communication technologies is not wholly responsible for the current state of information overload, they have certainly contributed.¹⁹⁷

Case¹⁹⁸ suggests that, when individuals are not able to adjust using one or more of Miller’s¹⁹⁹ tactics, they experience *information anxiety*. A term coined by Saul Wurman, information anxiety is “...produced by the ever-widening gap between what we understand and what we think we should understand. *Information anxiety* is the black hole between data and knowledge. It happens when

¹⁹² Case, *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior*, 152.

¹⁹³ Case et al., “Avoiding versus Seeking,” 358.

¹⁹⁴ Case, *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior*, 115.

¹⁹⁵ James G. Miller, “Information Input Overload and Psychopathology” 116, no. 8 (1960): 695–704. 697.

¹⁹⁶ David Bawden and Lyn Robinson, “The Dark Side of Information: Overload, Anxiety and Other Paradoxes and Pathologies,” *Journal of Information Science* 35, no. 2 (April 2009): 180–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551508095781>, 183.

¹⁹⁷ Bawden and Robinson, “The Dark Side of Information,” 184.

¹⁹⁸ Case, *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior*.

¹⁹⁹ Miller, “Information Input Overload and Psychopathology,” 697.

information doesn't tell us what we want or need to know."²⁰⁰ Information anxiety can be caused both by overload and by inadequate information and is often related to how comfortable (or, conversely, confused) an individual feels within a given information environment.²⁰¹ Naveed and Anwar identify two sub-concepts of information anxiety: information seeking anxiety and library anxiety. Information seeking anxiety and library anxiety are often researched and discussed in the LIS context, whereas information anxiety more broadly comes from the workplace context, and they are not often in conversation with one another.²⁰²

LIS conceptions of information seeking anxiety are rooted in information literacy paradigms. Information literacy is an LIS approach that is most often designed to develop the competence and skills needed to *access* information.²⁰³ Christine Pawley investigates the contradictions inherent within information literacy as a whole:

...combining the terms 'information' and 'literacy' sets up a tension between conflicting ideals of, on the one hand, a promethean vision of citizen empowerment and democracy, and, on the other, a desire to control 'quality' of information that has the potential to result in-albeit unintended-procrustean consequences...I argue that although Enlightenment ideology saw information use in terms of building concepts and empowering 'the public' to create new knowledge, the pedagogy of reading and policies to promote 'literacy' have systematically worked to render some groups of people—indeed, the majority—less capable of active information use and knowledge construction than an educated elite.²⁰⁴

Pawley's argument recalls some of the problems of Enlightenment epistemology mentioned in the previous section: for Pawley, the epistemic approach of LIS in developing theories of information literacy contributed to the larger landscape that makes the online spread of misinformation and disinformation so pervasive. In fact, Pawley argues that the very thing that allows information to be organized, its

²⁰⁰ Saul Wurman, *Information Anxiety: What to Do When Information Doesn't Tell You What You Need to Know* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1989), 35.

²⁰¹ Bawden and Robinson, "The Dark Side of Information," 185.

²⁰² Muhammad Asif Naveed and Mumtaz Ali Anwar, "Modeling Information Anxiety," *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 2019, 16.

²⁰³ Jutta Haider and Olof Sundin, *Invisible Search and Online Search Engines: The Ubiquity of Search in Everyday Life*, 1st ed. (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York : Routledge, 2019.: Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429448546>, 103.

²⁰⁴ Christine Pawley, "Information Literacy: A Contradictory Coupling," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 73, no. 4 (2022): 32, 425.

decontextualization and neutralization (that is, its divorce from contexts of its creation), can recreate Enlightenment-era stratified, top-down information systems and infrastructures of knowledge production. Critical information literacy (CIL) similarly questions the neutrality of information, its organization, and its gatekeepers: the librarian, the archivist, the search engine. CIL positions the librarian as a figure who can introduce users to a more nuanced understanding not only of the institutional biases of the library, but also the biases of a corporate search engine like Google Search.

In a 1986 article, Constance A. Mellon introduced a “grounded theory of library anxiety” distilled from data from 6000 undergraduate students. She found that 75–85% of them had primary feelings about the library that were fearful.²⁰⁵ This and other studies on library anxiety²⁰⁶ focus mainly on students and academic libraries. Introducing a related concept, Reichardt suggests that *reference overload* occurs when a reference librarian provides a patron with too many relevant resources.²⁰⁷ Reference librarians, particularly in the digital realm, must balance providing library patrons with too few or too many resources. The literature on other populations and patron groups experiencing library anxiety is comparatively thin.²⁰⁸ Naveed and Amin developed a scale of information seeking anxieties in their 2017 study, named the Information Seeking Anxiety Scale (ISAS). Testing the ISAS with postgraduate students in Pakistan, Naveed and Amin identified six components to the scale, in descending order of reported frequency: Resource Anxiety (difficulty making judgments about resource relevance), ICT Anxiety (anxiety about finding appropriate resources on the Internet), Library Anxiety, Search Anxiety, Mechanical Anxiety (having to do with special equipment/ hardware), and Thematic Anxiety (difficulty selecting a topic or gathering information related to a research topic). Seeking information is an inherently

²⁰⁵ Constance A Mellon, “Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development,” *College & Research Libraries*, 1986, 7.

²⁰⁶ Qun G. Jiao and Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, “Is Library Anxiety Important?,” *Library Review*, September 1, 1999, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00242539910283732>; Nahyun Kwon, “A Mixed-Methods Investigation of the Relationship between Critical Thinking and Library Anxiety among Undergraduate Students in Their Information Search Process,” *College & Research Libraries* 69, no. 2 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.69.2.117>.

²⁰⁷ Randy Reichardt, “Digital Reference Overload,” *Internet Reference Services Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (September 14, 2006): 105–12, https://doi.org/10.1300/J136v11n02_08, 105.

²⁰⁸ Naveed and Anwar. “Modeling Information Anxiety,” 16.

vulnerable, intimidating, and anxiety-inducing activity, in particular when consulting an expert like a librarian or archivist.

Bawden and Robinson term both information overload and information anxiety “information pathologies.” Information overload and anxiety are both related to the sense or reality of being out of control within a given information environment. Solutions to information overload often involve “*taking control* of one’s information environment.”²⁰⁹ The authors suggest several ways this could be done (including critical thinking, information visualization, and improved information organization), ultimately arguing that whatever is done must be *rational* and *personal*, reflecting the highly individualized nature of information pathologies. They argue, finally, that in order to fully understand and devise solutions for information pathologies within Web 2.0, more ISB research, especially in the online context, is needed.²¹⁰ The terminological choice of “pathology” indicates that these phenomena are thought of as informational *diseases* of some kind; it denotes wrongness and implies a corrective imperative. This is in line with some work that has been done framing conspiracy theories in terms of psychopathology.²¹¹ What if experiencing information overload and anxiety are simply part of the research process? If we think of these supposed information pathologies in terms of sense-making, then they can be conceptualized as gaps that need to be bridged. Gap-bridging constitutes a normal and expected aspect of information seeking that should not be thought of as a *pathology* to be corrected, but rather as part of the process of information seeking—as-step taking.

Indeed, Carol C. Kuhlthau also conceptualizes confusion and anxiety as constituents of the information seeking process. Kuhlthau’s 1991 model of information seeking, the “information search process” (ISP), was the first foray into modeling knowledge production as a continuous experience rather than in a linear, question-answer format. Kuhlthau’s ISP has six stages, each of which has affective,

²⁰⁹ Bawden and Robinson, “The Dark Side of Information,” 187.

²¹⁰ Bawden and Robinson, “The Dark Side of Information,” 187-188.

²¹¹ Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey Klofstad, and Matthew D. Atkinson, “What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions,” *Political Research Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 57–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912915621621>.

cognitive, and physical features. She points to specific stages at which emotion, overload and anxiety are more likely to happen, drawing particular attention to the affective: “Affective aspects, such as attitude, stance, and motivation, may influence specificity capability and relevance judgements as much as cognitive aspects...”²¹² Figure 2.1 shows each of the six stages, from initiation to presentation, and characteristic feelings, thoughts, actions, and tasks associated with each stage. Stage 1., Initiation, is often characterized by feelings of “uncertainty.” Stage 3., Exploration, similarly, is characterized by “confusion, frustration, and doubt.” Kuhlthau states that this stage is often the one in which the search may be abandoned as a result of an inability to adequately articulate an information need: “Information encountered rarely fits smoothly with previously-held constructs and information from different sources commonly seems inconsistent and incompatible. Users may find the situation quite discouraging and threatening, causing a sense of personal inadequacy as well as frustration with the system.”²¹³ Kuhlthau thus illustrates that the early stages of information seeking are an exercise in vulnerability and can often result in anxiety, self-consciousness, and feelings of confusion and/ or being out of control. The effects of emotions on the research process should not be underestimated. I asked participants about their emotions at different stages of the research process (beginning, middle, and end) to determine whether or not counter-establishment researchers have a consistent emotional reaction to different parts of the research process.

²¹² Carol C. Kuhlthau, “Inside the Search Process: Information Seeking from the User’s Perspective,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 42, no. 5 (1991): 361–71, 363.

²¹³ Kuhlthau, “Inside the Search Process,” 366-367.

TABLE 2. Information search process (ISP).

Stages in ISP	Feelings Common to Each Stage	Thoughts Common to Each Stage	Actions Common to Each Stage	Appropriate Task According to Kuhlthau Model
1. Initiation	Uncertainty	General/Vague	Seeking Background Information	Recognize
2. Selection	Optimism			Identify
3. Exploration	Confusion/Frustration/Doubt		Seeking Relevant Information	Investigate
4. Formulation	Clarity	Narrowed/Clearer		Formulate
5. Collection	Sense of Direction/Confidence	Increased Interest	Seeking Relevant or Focused Information	Gather
6. Presentation	Relief/Satisfaction or Disappointment	Clearer or Focused		Complete

Figure 2.1: The Information Search Process, from Kuhlthau

Uncertainty is a primary feature of early stages in the ISP—indeed, feelings of uncertainty tend to be a catalyst for initiating the research process—fading away as the topic becomes clearer over the course of the research process. In 2008, Kuhlthau, along with Jannica Heinström and Ross J. Todd, reevaluated the ISP for utility in different information environments. The findings show a slight variability in feelings on an individual level, but they ultimately validate the model’s accuracy in changing information environments.²¹⁴ The model remains a useful way to explore and conceptualize search behaviors in a

²¹⁴ Kuhlthau, Carol C, Jannica Heinström, and Ross J Todd. “The ‘Information Search Process’ Revisited: Is the Model Still Useful?” *Information Research* 13, no. 4 (2008): 17.

variety of contexts. However, its construction assumes that the research process is inherently conceived around an answerable question with a defined beginning, middle, and end to the process. One aspect of this dissertation is to assess the ISP as it functions for researchers who explore enduring mysteries and questions that seem not to have an answer.

Information *avoidance* is often discussed as though it is the inverse of information seeking:²¹⁵ the user encounters the information and then subsequently ignores it.²¹⁶ Golman et. al, in line with Chatman,²¹⁷ Kuhlthau,²¹⁸ and Miller,²¹⁹ suggest that feelings of anxiety and overload can lead to information avoidance. Conceptualized in terms of Dervin’s sense-making, information avoidance constitutes a specific reaction to gappiness, or a distinct method of step-taking: moving backward and forward, turning away from a gap, etc. Much of the research on information avoidance has to do with medical information.²²⁰ Case et. al²²¹ problematize the embeddedness of the notion of information seeking as *uncertainty reduction*; they argue that in some cases, individuals will choose to increase their uncertainty, rather than decreasing it, by avoiding pertinent information. Golman et. al, coming from an economics perspective, suggest that,

In some cases, [people] avoid information to, in effect, license them to behave as they would really like to behave—providing ‘plausible deniability’ of unethical behavior not only to other people but also to themselves. Even more tellingly, people often avoid information simply

²¹⁵ Dieter Frey, “Different Levels of Cognitive Dissonance, Information Seeking, and Information Avoidance,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 43, no. 6 (1982): 1175–83, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.43.6.1175>; Leilach Manheim, “Information Non-Seeking Behaviour,” *Information Research* 19, no. 4 (2014): 210–20.

²¹⁶ Russell Golman, David Hagmann, and George Loewenstein, “Information Avoidance,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 55, no. 1 (March 2017): 96–135, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.20151245>, 98.

²¹⁷ Chatman, “A Theory of Life in the Round.”

²¹⁸ Kuhlthau, “Inside the Search Process: Information Seeking from the User’s Perspective.”

²¹⁹ Miller, “Information Input Overload and Psychopathology.”

²²⁰ Erica Dawson, Kenneth Savitsky, and David Dunning, “‘Don’t Tell Me, I Don’t Want to Know’: Understanding People’s Reluctance to Obtain Medical Diagnostic Information1,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 36, no. 3 (2006): 751–68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-9029.2006.00028.x>; Jennifer L. Howell and James A. Shepperd, “Reducing Information Avoidance Through Affirmation,” *Psychological Science* 23, no. 2 (February 2012): 141–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797611424164>.

²²¹ Case et al., “Avoiding versus Seeking.”

because the information would make them feel bad—because information carries direct, and often negative, utility.²²²

In such a way, seeking and/ or avoiding information is also decidedly affective: information avoidance may stem from a desire to avert negative emotions. Information avoidance can also be connected with confirmation bias. Case et al. argue that while we may be amenable to information incongruous with our worldview on a case-to-case basis, overall and long-term, individuals tend to seek information that *agrees* with their worldview.²²³

Information pathologies echo the ways in which conspiracy theories are framed in terms of psychopathology, as will be detailed in the following section. Framing anything in terms of pathology automatically places value judgment upon it, suggesting that there are correct and rational ways to seek information, as well as incorrect and irrational ways to do so. For counter-establishment topics, which are predicated on enduring mysteries, do feelings of uncertainty ever go away completely over the course of the research process? Or, does the fundamental unanswerability of the questions at hand keep feelings of uncertainty and frustration present throughout the research process? Further, Whitson and Galinsky²²⁴ found that inducing feelings of being out of control leads to increased pattern perception, including perception of conspiracies. Yet, is not research and/or information seeking a function of perceiving patterns, perhaps to different degrees? Could a sense of lacking control result in *better* research, or research that is neither better nor worse? More generally, how do feelings of confusion, disorientation, anxiety, and overload affect the research practices of counter-establishment researchers? How do counter-establishment researchers bridge the gaps of information overload, anxiety, etc., and is that gap-bridging distinct from other kinds of research?

²²² Golman, Hagmann, and Loewenstein, “Information Avoidance,” 114.

²²³ Golman, Hagmann, and Loewenstein, “Information Avoidance,” 110.

²²⁴ Whitson and Galinsky, “Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception.”

Searching for Information in Archives

The ISB models, theories, and methodologies outlined above are primarily developed and tested within university library environments. Seeking information in a library is a different experience than seeking information in an archives²²⁵ due to a variety of factors, including the fact that knowledge organization (KO) functions differently in libraries and archives. KO, rooted in LIS, is not often discussed in relation to archival praxis.²²⁶ In the words of Birger Hjørland, KO is “...about describing, representing, filing and organizing documents, document representations, subjects and concepts...”²²⁷ Archival KO (AKO) is a nascent field of study. Iterations of works (the contents of most libraries) are perhaps easier to categorize according to traditional KO systems of indexing and classification according to subjects and contents of materials. Library classification systems must be robust enough to act as a tool for shelving items in context, retrieving them, and browsing them in catalog form. As opposed to classifying according to subject or content, AKO is predicated on the principle of provenance.²²⁸ Provenance determines how records are classified and how they are described.²²⁹ Some early archives were classified according to subject, but because archives house unique documents rather than iterations of works (as do libraries), archivists discovered that the bigger the holdings of an archive, the less feasible item-level subject classification was.²³⁰

Provenance is a complex, contested, difficult-to-define concept. At its most basic, it refers to the idea that all records from a single origin (person, organization, etc.) should be kept together, maintaining

²²⁵ Archives are referred to in this manner to separate them from the humanistic “Archive,” as explicated by Michelle Caswell, “‘The Archive’ Is Not An Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies” 16, no. 1 (2016): 21.

²²⁶ Natália Bolfarini Tognoli, José Augusto Chaves Guimarães, and Joseph T. Tennis, “Diplomatics as a Methodological Perspective for Archival Knowledge Organization,” in *NASKO*, vol. 4, 2013, 204–12, <https://doi.org/10.7152/nasko.v4i1.14661>.

²²⁷ Birger Hjørland, “Knowledge Organization,” *Knowledge Organization* 23, no. 6 (2016).

²²⁸ Hjørland, “Knowledge Organization,” 478-80.

²²⁹ José Guimarães and Natália Tognoli, “Provenance as a Domain Analysis Approach in Archival Knowledge Organization,” *Knowledge Organization* 42 (January 1, 2015): 562–69, <https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-2015-8-562>, 564-565.

²³⁰ Shelly Sweeney, “Provenance of Archival Materials,” in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, ed. Mary Niles Maack and Marcia J Bates, 3rd ed. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2010), 4317.

their *original order* to the extent possible. In other words, “records [ought to be] managed in ways that secure and preserve knowledge of their origins and contexts.”²³¹ In archives, records are classified by *fonds* or *record groups*, rather than subject: the *creator* and *context* are privileged as organizing guidelines. For a document to be an *archival record* in the first place, Guimarães and Tognoli²³² intimate that it must be grouped together with other records from the same source into a record group or fond, as that is the only way that it can be fully understood. In contrast to the LIS decontextualization of information, which makes it much easier to organize, archives keep records in context, prioritizing the circumstances in which they were created.

Archival Silences, Secrecy, Imagined Records

Michel-Rolphe Trouillot introduced the *archival silences* framework in his seminal *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*.²³³ Silences, he argued, enter history-making at four critical points: “...the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).”²³⁴ Trouillot emphasizes that this framework is not all-inclusive and should not be mapped onto all means of historical production uncritically. The four silences “...help us understand why not all silences are equal and why they cannot be addressed—or redressed—in the same manner...any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly.”²³⁵ This recalls the particularist approach to conspiracy theories, that it is often more productive to address a

²³¹ Geoffrey Yeo, “Continuing Debates about Description,” in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2017), 164.

²³² Guimarães and Tognoli, “Provenance as a Domain Analysis Approach in Archival Knowledge Organization,” 566.

²³³ Michel-Rolphe Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1997).

²³⁴ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 26.

²³⁵ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 26.

specific conspiracy theory (or, in some instances, a group of conspiracy theories) in terms of its unique characteristics, rather than as a general group of phenomena.

Silences can enter the archive when records are destroyed, never created, kept secret, lost, forged, appraised, or de-accessioned out of a collection. A silence can be created accidentally, as when a record is lost; for political reasons, to oppress one group and laud another; or to avoid accountability, bureaucratic wrongdoing, or embarrassment.²³⁶ In the words of David Thomas, "...it has become accepted that archival silences are a proper subject for enquiry and to view the absence of records as positive statements, rather than passive gaps."²³⁷ Likewise, archives are not complete, preserved, static portraits of history. Sue McKemmish suggests that records are physically stable, but their potential to be pluralized, or brought into new contexts, shifts over time and is interminable.²³⁸

As Stacy Wood argues, classification constitutes a major source of silence in government archives.²³⁹ Government secrecy has the potential to constrain knowledge production and to create and maintain deep power imbalances.²⁴⁰ Simon Fowler contends that unchecked classification "damages the institution of the archive. Archivists and users need to be vigilant to ensure that as many documents as possible are available for public access. The worst Silence of the Archive is secrecy."²⁴¹ Although, arguably, classification is not the worst kind of archival silence, Fowler's point—that secrecy upends the way that archives function—remains salient.

Nyhan et al.²⁴² conducted an experimental study in which they hypothesized that, first, individuals presented with redacted government documents would be more likely to believe in a

²³⁶ David Thomas, Valerie Johnson, and Simon Fowler, eds., *The Silence of the Archive* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2017), 34.

²³⁷ Thomas, Johnson, and Fowler, *The Silence of the Archive*, xx.

²³⁸ Sue McKemmish, "Recordkeeping in the Continuum: An Australian Tradition," in *Research in the Archival Multiverse*, ed. Anne J. Gilliland, Sue McKemmish, and Andrew J. Lau (Clayton, Australia: Monash University Publishing, 2016).

²³⁹ Wood, "Making Secret(s): The Infrastructure of Classified Information."

²⁴⁰ Steven Aftergood, "Government Secrecy and Knowledge Production: A Survey of Some General Issues," in *Government Secrecy: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2009).

²⁴¹ Thomas, Johnson, and Fowler, *The Silence of the Archive*, 29.

²⁴² Nyhan et al., "Classified or Coverup?"

conspiracy theory than those who did not, and second, that individuals who were already conspiratorially minded would display a greater tendency to believe a conspiracy theory when presented with a redacted document.²⁴³ Their first hypothesis was proven, and their second disproven, illustrating that “These findings confirm the expectation from lay epistemic theory that redactions are often seen as evidence that government has something to hide and can therefore contribute to conspiracy beliefs.”²⁴⁴ In such a way, we can see how encounters with the archival silence of redacted government documents may influence how counter-establishment researchers approach their topics. Wood (2017) directly addresses the relationship that many conspiracy theorists have with classified information—as-evidence: “Classified information is a sanctioned break in the provision of evidence, leaving space for alternative narrative building and the development of new evidential paradigms that stem from new data or no data.”²⁴⁵ Similarly, Eadon²⁴⁶ found that records from the JFK Assassination Collection that were so poorly scanned as to be illegible functioned in the same way a redaction would—as a silence, easily filled with theories about what it might contain, creating an *imagined record*.

Gilliland and Caswell introduce the concepts of imagined records and impossible archival imaginaries. Imagined records “can function societally in ways similar to actual records because of the weight of their absence or their aspirational nature;”²⁴⁷ impossible archival imaginaries are “archivally impossible in the sense that they will never result in actualized records in any traditional sense unless they are drawn into some kind of co-constitutive relationship with actualized records”²⁴⁸ Imagined archives and impossible archival imaginaries are alternative, affective understandings of records and their collectives. They can easily clash with existing records. The existing record may represent the institutional or official viewpoint, and the imagined record may encapsulate subversion or resistance to

²⁴³ Nyhan et al., “Classified or Coverup?” 111.

²⁴⁴ Nyhan et al., “Classified or Coverup?” 119.

²⁴⁵ Wood, “Making Secret(s): The Infrastructure of Classified Information,” 144.

²⁴⁶ Eadon, “Useful Information Turned into Something Useless.”

²⁴⁷ Anne J. Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined,” *Archival Science* 16 (2016): 53–75, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9259-z>, 53.

²⁴⁸ Gilliland and Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined,” 60.

that viewpoint.²⁴⁹ In introducing these new terms, Gilliland and Caswell acknowledge the situatedness of records and the power of archives to function differently for different individuals, according to a variety of factors. Imagined records constitute one important way in which an archival silence can crystallize into something that can be pluralized beyond the archival context, functioning, in a certain way, as a record.

The challenges of seeking information in archives: centering the archival user

Due in part to provenance's privileging of context and creator rather than subject (as is the case in libraries and online search), archives struggle with usability, particularly when it comes to novice users. Most users come to the archives unprepared for the complexity of information seeking and working with primary sources. Yakel and Torres introduce the concept of *archival intelligence*, which they define as "...a researcher's knowledge of archival principles, practices, and institutions, such as the reason underlying archival rules and procedures, the means for developing search strategies to explore research questions, and an understanding of the relationship between primary sources and their surrogates."²⁵⁰ Archival intelligence is most often developed over the course of doing research in an archive, as well as participating in some form of archival user education; it is rare that novice users will come into the archives without experiencing at least some confusion. Duff and Yakel reference Eastwood's notion that archival records, as byproducts of activities, are virtually unsearchable using typical queries and techniques that most users are familiar with.²⁵¹ That is, the nature of records precludes their searchability in subject or content terms. This can result in users feeling, even when conducting research with the assistance of a reference archivist, as though they have not "gotten all of it," in the words of one researcher interviewed by Yakel and Torres.²⁵² That is, doing research in archives always feels as though

²⁴⁹ Gilliland and Caswell, "Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined," 71.

²⁵⁰ Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres, "AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise," *The American Archivist* 66, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 51–78, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.66.1.q022h85pn51n5800>, 51.

²⁵¹ Wendy Duff and Elizabeth Yakel, "Archival Interaction," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2017), 193–223. 27.

²⁵² Yakel and Torres, "AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise," 70.

one is searching incorrectly, or that the reference archivist may not know enough to direct you toward the relevant information.

Yakel argues that although its intent is to provide access, archival representation (arrangement and description) can also complicate the research process to some degree: “Researchers must know the schemas and codes and understand the underlying systems of privileging, classifying, and selecting that comprise both arrangement and description.”²⁵³ Finding aids function at multiple levels, as a generalized organizing document, a guide to a collection for researchers, and an archival administrative document. As Daines and Nimer point out, the finding aid’s multiple functionalities makes them complex and not very user friendly; users “...expect sophisticated search tools that allow them to directly access reliable and accurate information. They also expect to be able to understand the search results that search engines bring back to them.”²⁵⁴ The authors go as far as to assert that finding aids, in their capacity as research tools, can in fact create an “access barrier” for users.²⁵⁵ Many researchers have no prior knowledge of the inner workings of archives, and yet many of the tools with which they are expected to work (e.g., finding aids) rely on the user possessing this knowledge. Even as finding aids may provide an entry into a collection, they may also function as a *silence* for researchers unfamiliar with archival practice.

Many early attempts at fostering greater access to materials saw archives making their collections and/ or their representations available online by digitizing collections, finding aids, or both. As a result, researchers who are not familiar with the classificatory logics of archives have encountered them online without the mediating presence of a reference archivist or the controlled space of a reading room.²⁵⁶ Yeo describes the effects of digital technologies—after the digital revolution made finding aids generally more accessible to users or potential users of archives, some problems arose:

...standardization initiatives have concentrated on intellectual structures for description and rules for content; little has been done to identify best practices for presenting descriptive work to users.

²⁵³ Elizabeth Yakel, “Archival Representation,” *Archival Science* 3, no. 1 (March 2003): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02438926>, 2.

²⁵⁴ J. Gordon Daines and Cory L. Nimer, “Re-Imagining Archival Display: Creating User-Friendly Finding Aids,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 4–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2011.574019>, 5.

²⁵⁵ Daines and Nimer, “Re-Imagining Archival Display,” 4.

²⁵⁶ Duff and Yakel, “Archival Interaction,” 197.

It is arguable that presentation may have mattered less when finding aids were almost always consulted in reading rooms with archivists on hand to offer assistance, but becomes critical when descriptions are rendered digitally for remote use.²⁵⁷

In online environments, the reference interaction does not exist and users are left to fend for themselves with regard to deciphering finding aids and attempting to use search functions.

The reference interaction can itself be a barrier to access as well; it all depends on the individual reference archivist and their attitudes and practices. Duff and Fox suggest that reference services have historically been underrepresented in the literature of archival studies, particularly when compared to LIS reference literature.²⁵⁸ Pugh argues that one major activity undertaken by reference personnel is negotiation of expectations: “Archivists and users may have very different expectations about the reference interaction. Discrepancies in expectations may cause confusion, disappointment, or failure to use archival holdings effectively...Expecting archives to be like libraries, users may feel rebuffed if they cannot be accommodated without an appointment and disappointed that documents do not circulate.”²⁵⁹ This expectation, that archives will be as user-friendly as libraries, likely prevents a lot of archival research from even taking place. Yakel looks at archival reference as a form of knowledge management, advocating for a reconceptualization of archival reference from a document delivery or information transmission model to a knowledge co-creation process between user and archivist.²⁶⁰ In such a way, Yakel ultimately calls for adequate translation of the record-keeping context to the user.²⁶¹ That is, archival user education on the level of the reference interaction may, in essence, look like the archivist imparting the why and how of archival reference, detailing the process of searching for and locating specific documents or collections.

²⁵⁷ Yeo, “Continuing Debates about Description,” 175.

²⁵⁸ Wendy Duff and Allyson Fox, “‘You’re a Guide Rather than an Expert’: Archival Reference from an Archivist’s Point of View,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 27, no. 2 (February 9, 2007): 129–53. 130.

²⁵⁹ Pugh, “Archival Reference and Access,” 2017, 157.

²⁶⁰ Elizabeth Yakel, “Thinking Inside and Outside the Boxes: Archival Reference Services at the Turn of the Century,” *Archivaria* 49, no. 0 (January 1, 2000): 140–60.

²⁶¹ Yakel, “Thinking Inside and Outside the Boxes,” 155.

Doing research in an archive may compound the feelings of confusion, vulnerability, and anxiety felt in the course of information seeking in general.²⁶² That is: to work with an AKOS, a user must effectively translate their query into provenance-appropriate terms having to do with “an organization’s functions and activities,” as no system yet exists that can accurately translate content-index terms into provenance terms.²⁶³ This means that archival users must either: a) Encounter an AKOS without an intermediary, and more likely than not leave the encounter feeling confused/ threatened by the alien organization of the system and its apparent lack of searchability (frequently the case with online archival holdings); or b) encounter an AKOS *through* an intermediary, who does the work of bridging the gap (frequently the case at physical archives). In both of these cases, however, the structures of the AKOS presume that users already possess archival intelligence and may not recognize the need for broadly situated archival user education. Mandatory one-on-one, in-person reference in physical archives is one way to facilitate foundational archival user education, but it puts most, if not all, of the burden of archival user education on individual reference archivists. Archival labor is already stretched thin, with archivists wearing a multitude of hats at any given time.

Several barriers exist for people interested in counter-establishment topics to conduct research in archives. First, some challenges exist for all novice users in archives: the early stages of information seeking are always a practice in vulnerability and confusion;²⁶⁴ and, as shown in this section, archives themselves are not intuitive to the average novice user.²⁶⁵ The confusion of conducting research in an archive could have a particular significance for counter-establishment researchers. The AKO logic of provenance prioritizes the creator over the subjects and users of a given record. Creators are authorities by virtue of having the power to create and maintain—archives are themselves sites at which power is made

²⁶² Kuhlthau, “Inside the Search Process: Information Seeking from the User’s Perspective.”

²⁶³ Duff and Yakel, “Archival Interaction,” 207.

²⁶⁴ Kuhlthau, “Inside the Search Process: Information Seeking from the User’s Perspective.”

²⁶⁵ Pugh, “Archival Reference and Access.”

manifest and indelible.²⁶⁶ In such a way, any kind of mistrust of authoritative individuals and institutions comes up directly against the primary AKO logic of provenance. To do research in an archive, counter-establishment researchers must also put their trust in a reference archivist, who is an expert on the archives, which, as an institution, privileges authority. It may be particularly challenging for counter-establishment researchers to conduct research in an archive, but many still do. This dissertation examines exactly what that looks like in practice.

Searching for Information Online

Nowadays, for information online entails working within the web 2.0 infrastructural internet, which is dominated by corporatized platforms, most significantly for research, Google Search. The ways in which people search for information using an advertising service (Google) is necessarily distinct from the ways in which people search for information using public institutions (libraries and archives). Indeed, it is of the utmost importance for any kind of business or institution to be visible on Google; the Googlized information ecosystem of the Internet has extreme implications for molding the ways in which information is created, circulated, and located.²⁶⁷

Safiya Noble's 2018 monograph *Algorithms of Oppression* outlined the insidious nature of Google's algorithmic curation of information, which routinely reinforces and underlines existing hegemonic structures of power. Although Google Search runs on an advertising business model, results are curated and presented by the company as neutral and factual.²⁶⁸ Further, in Noble's words, "Google's monopoly status, coupled with its algorithmic practices of biasing information toward the interests of the neoliberal capital and social elites in the United States, has resulted in a provision of information that

²⁶⁶ Verne Harris, "The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 63–86, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435631>.

²⁶⁷ Jutta Haider and Olof Sundin, *Invisible Search and Online Search Engines: The Ubiquity of Search in Everyday Life*, 1st ed. (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York : Routledge, 2019.: Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429448546>. 14.

²⁶⁸ Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018).24-25.

purports to be credible but is actually a reflection of advertising interests... Yet Google's users think of it as a public resource, generally free from commercial interest."²⁶⁹ Search results are shaped by and reflect the most profitable, clickable discourses, and thus searching for information online must be treated as a distinct activity when compared to earlier models of information seeking that were based on searching within the stable environment of the information institution. In fact, as Haider and Sundin point out, the *search-ification* of everyday life extends even to the structures of databases used by information institutions: "[web search engines] are increasingly seen to replace specialised retrieval systems or these have begun to emulate general-purpose search engines in order to appear user-friendly. As using search engines and doing so proficiently became feasible for the general public, searching became not only inserted into all kinds of social practices, but was also de-professionalized. We propose to call this the *mundane-ification* of search." Information literacy in the current informational environment is often no longer about how to *access* information, but rather, how to evaluate information for trustworthiness and credibility.

Haider and Sundin use the term *critical evaluation of information* to refer to "the activity of evaluating if certain information (and information sources) is to be trusted enough in order to be acted upon. That could in contemporary online environments be, for example, a website, a book, a Facebook status, a blog post, a tweet or – which we focus on – the workings of an online search engine, such as Google, in order to challenge the given presentation of results and the order of ranking if necessary."²⁷⁰ The authors also draw attention to the importance of cognitive authorities when evaluating information—endorsement or presentation of information by a trusted authority, expert, influencer, pundit, institution, or celebrity will often influence whether or not an individual seeker of information believes in its credibility. Assessing credibility often involves evaluating several dimensions, most commonly trustworthiness and expertise. Rieh suggests that trustworthiness can be predicated on perceived morality,

²⁶⁹ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, 36.

²⁷⁰ Haider and Sundin, *Invisible Search and Online Search Engines: The Ubiquity of Search in Everyday Life*, 104.

fairness, truthfulness, knowledge, and skill of the purported expert.²⁷¹ This definition of credibility is not terribly epistemically flexible, however: for many, trustworthiness and expertise are related in the inverse. That is, the more institutional expertise a person has, the less trustworthy they are. Returning to Kahan's notion of cultural cognition, Stephen John outlines Kahan's model, which suggests that identity is tangled with cultural norms and values existing along two distinct axes: "...hierarchical/egalitarian, and communitarian/individualistic. In turn, accepting certain sorts of factual claims may challenge or affirm those values, because accepting those claims are commonly seen to lead to further normative conclusions."²⁷² People accept claims that already fit in with their worldview; because of cultural context, there is no one kind of credibility or cognitive authority. For some communities, a white Evangelical preacher would unquestionably be a source of cognitive authority. For other communities, it would be the inverse.

Normative commitments belie moral frameworks as well. Heersmink, taking an epistemological approach, suggests that there are epistemic virtues and epistemic vices when it comes to evaluating information, positing that "Whilst an epistemically virtuous use of the Internet will not guarantee that one will acquire true beliefs, understanding or even knowledge, it will strongly improve one's information-seeking behaviours."²⁷³ Extrapolating from Behr, Heersmink presents epistemic virtues as follows: "First, virtues required for getting the learning process off the ground: curiosity, intellectual autonomy and intellectual humility. Second, virtues required for keeping the learning process on the right track: attentiveness, intellectual carefulness and intellectual thoroughness. Third, virtues for overcoming obstacles to productive learning: open-mindedness, intellectual courage and intellectual tenacity."²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ Rieh, Soo Young. "Credibility and Cognitive Authority of Information." In *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences, Third Edition*, edited by Marcia J. Bates and Mary Niles Maack. CRC Press, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.1081/E-ELIS3>.

²⁷² Stephen John, "Expertise in Climate Science," in *The Routledge Handbook of Applied Epistemology*, by David Coady and James Chase, ed. David Coady and James Chase, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2018), 131–41, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315679099-10>.

²⁷³ Richard Heersmink, "A Virtue Epistemology of the Internet: Search Engines, Intellectual Virtues and Education," *Social Epistemology* 32, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2017.1383530>.

²⁷⁴ Heersmink, "A Virtue Epistemology of the Internet: Search Engines, Intellectual Virtues and Education."

Intellectual vices, on the other hand, are the extremes between which the virtues listed above lie: Heersmink gives the example of open-mindedness lying between the two vices of dogmatism and naïvety. These intellectual virtues can be displayed by anyone, no matter the topic they happen to be researching.

Haider and Sundin interviewed a broad group of adolescents about their information seeking practices and resources they trust. The authors discuss conspiracy theories as an example of the difficulties inherent in implementing information literacy interventions that have been designed and tested in a library setting. According to them, “...conspiracy theories more than anything else put the spotlight on the contradictory enactments and perceptions of trust. Showing serious interest in conspiracy theories can easily be construed as taking a critical stance. As one interviewee noted: ‘...there’s a bit of a contradiction here when you’re against conspiracy theories. Because conspiracy theories are a kind of source critique, if you think about it.’”²⁷⁵ This was something that showed up in my interviews as well: the notion that considering conspiracy theories is a form of critique—which it is, if one that is epistemically distinct from dominant modes of critique, including academics’ own. Some of Haider and Sundin’s interviewees looked up conspiracy theories for entertainment purposes, not fully committing to them. Others ultimately expressed greater trust in conspiracy theorists than established institutions. Haider and Sundin pointed out that Google was generally considered the most trustworthy corporate information intermediary by their interviewees; it is important to note that some conservative conspiracy theorists are making a concerted effort to move away from Google (as an emblem of Big Tech) by using DuckDuckGo for their information seeking needs.²⁷⁶

Haider and Sundin introduce the following matrix, which presents different stereotypes of information evaluators:

²⁷⁵ Haider and Sundin, *Invisible Search and Online Search Engines: The Ubiquity of Search in Everyday Life*, 9.

²⁷⁶ Thompson, Stuart A. “Fed Up With Google, Conspiracy Theorists Turn to DuckDuckGo.” *The New York Times*, February 23, 2022, sec. Technology. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/technology/duckduckgo-conspiracy-theories.html>.

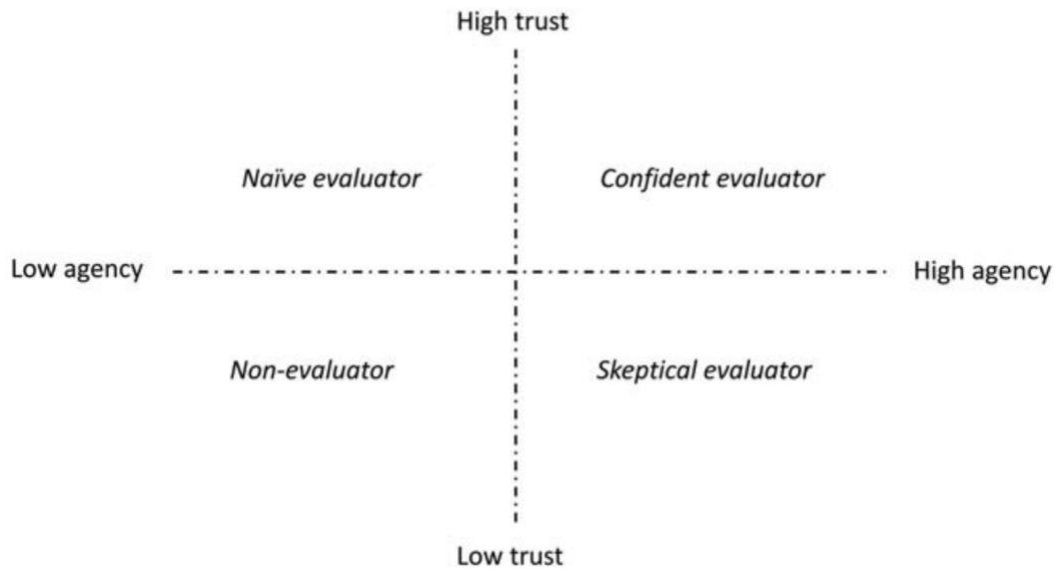


Figure 2.2: The Information Assessment Stereotypes Matrix²⁷⁷

Naïve evaluators are not critical of information they encounter, taking and believing it at face value. Non-evaluators bring together “...both low trust and low agency. Low agency is configured into the platform infrastructure and the opportunities for users to make conscious adjustments tend to be hidden inside dark patterns.” Confident evaluators believe in their own and experts’ abilities. Low trust and high agency, on the other hand, results in skeptical evaluators, who tend not to believe encountered information but who do believe in their own capability as evaluators of information.²⁷⁸ This is likely where most counter-establishment researchers exist.

Knowledge production in online environments

Alice Marwick and William Clyde Partin examine QAnon knowledge production practices as a form of what they term *populist expertise*. Populist expertise refers to a rejection of academic/ scientific/ establishment journalistic knowledge, instead championing knowledge that is produced by “...those who

²⁷⁷ Haider and Sundin, *Invisible Search and Online Search Engines: The Ubiquity of Search in Everyday Life*.

²⁷⁸ Haider and Sundin, *Invisible Search and Online Search Engines: The Ubiquity of Search in Everyday Life*.

may feel disenfranchised from mainstream political participation.”²⁷⁹ The authors thus show that—just as we saw with information seeking more broadly—expertise is not a fixed, static category; rather, it functions differently within different communities of practice. Further,

...QAnon can be understood as a participatory culture that demonstrates the creative and supportive aspects of participatory communities while espousing antidemocratic and anti-institutional ideals. This calls into question the unerringly positive framing of participation, and its counterpart of dark participation. Our research also shows the centrality of “doing your own research” to QAnon, a quality it has in common with other fringe cultures, from antivaxxers to flat earthers. Bakers prize research and close textual interpretation, or “scriptural inference” (Tripodi, 2018), undermining assumptions that media literacy or fact-checking are effective counters to the spread of misinformation. Rather, in drawing on scriptural inference, we emphasize that these practices, along with the knowledge they produce, legitimize and make rational what might otherwise seem counterfactual.²⁸⁰

Francesca Tripodi’s notion of *scriptural inference* refers to a pattern of conservatives reading the mainstream media hyper-closely, similar to the way they study the Bible. In Tripodi’s words, “Because [scriptural inference] prioritizes direct analysis of primary sources, respondents relied on Google to ‘do their own research.’ However, few if any members expressed an accurate understanding of the algorithms Google uses to serve search results.”²⁸¹ Scriptural inference is a particular type of evaluative practice used by conservatives—more research must be done before conclusions can be drawn about whether or not it can be applied to conspiracy theories beyond those that are housed within conservative ideology, like QAnon.

König²⁸² looks at Wikipedia as a site for contested knowledge production. Focusing on the Wikipedia Talk pages for the article on the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, König asks how knowledge is produced in the open, supposedly democratized context of Wikipedia. Whose voices are prioritized and whose are marginalized? What kind of knowledge eventually predominates?²⁸³ König found that, rather than democratizing expertise and/ or knowledge production, Wikipedia in fact

²⁷⁹ Marwick and Partin, “Constructing Alternative Facts,” 15

²⁸⁰ Marwick and Partin, “Constructing Alternative Facts,” 17.

²⁸¹ Tripodi, Francesca. “Searching for Alternative Facts: Analyzing Scriptural Inference in Conservative News Practices.” New York, NY: Data & Society Research Institute, 2017.

²⁸² René König, “Wikipedia: Between Lay Participation and Elite Knowledge Representation,” *Information, Communication & Society* 16, no. 2 (March 1, 2013): 160–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.734319>.

²⁸³ König, “Wikipedia: Between Lay Participation and Elite Knowledge Representation,” 162-163.

reproduced the “knowledge hierarchies” present in other, more traditional sites of knowledge production.²⁸⁴ Similarly, Narayan and Preljevic²⁸⁵ look at belief in anti-vaccination conspiracy theories from an ISB perspective. Through a grounded theory content analysis of a small sample of publicly available blog data, the authors found that, “...the following play a part in their information behaviour: Internet and social media, along with selective information seeking, distrust of authority, cognitive dissonance or the tendency to seek consistency among their cognitions (beliefs and opinions), sense making, information avoidance, and the concept of *life in the round* (Chatman 1999).”²⁸⁶ Narayan and Preljevic call for doctors and nurses to participate more directly in the flow of information on social media, so as to quell the polarization through operationalization of their expertise. Like Bawden and Robinson’s framing of information anxiety and overload as *pathologies*, Narayan and Preljevic address conspiracist information seeking as a *prima facie* problem in need of concrete solutions. König, on the other hand, tackles conspiracist and official knowledges as though they are on the same level in an attempt to avoid value judgements. In line with this approach, Raab et. al²⁸⁷ found that, at least in some cases, no meaningful distinction can be made between so-called “conspiratorial beliefs” and “official stories.” Instead, many shades of narrative containing elements of official and conspiratorial beliefs exist. They also found that believing in one of these varied shades of conspiracy narratives is a method of individuation and community building.

Extrapolating from König and Raab et. al’s conclusions, before academics go about trying to solve the so-called “problem” of conspiracy theories writ large, it is imperative that we examine individual theories and their adherents, as well as conduct evaluative studies that characterize the diversity of approaches to gap bridging and step taking in the course of seeking information *about* a conspiracy theory, particularly online.

²⁸⁴ König, “Wikipedia: Between Lay Participation and Elite Knowledge Representation,” 170.

²⁸⁵ B. Narayan and M. Preljevic, “An Information Behaviour Approach to Conspiracy Theories: Listening in on Voices from Within the Vaccination Debate,” December 5, 2016, <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/handle/10453/90570>.

²⁸⁶ Narayan and Preljevic, “An Information Behaviour Approach to Conspiracy Theories,” 9.

²⁸⁷ Marius H. Raab et al., “Thirty Shades of Truth: Conspiracy Theories as Stories of Individuation, Not of Pathological Delusion,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00406>.

II. Conspiracy Theory Scholarship

Studying Conspiracy Theory

To study conspiracy theory in the early 2020s is to be constantly and consistently confronted with QAnon. The theory was seemingly everywhere in the last few years, its deleterious effects on political participation discussed at length in both journalistic and academic contexts.²⁸⁸ Its mass appeal and concomitant harms cannot be denied: QAnon had an undeniable role in the insurrection at the capitol on January 6, 2021. QAnon is a superconspiracy theory, defined by Michael Butter as a combination of event conspiracy theories, which “...center on a specific, relatively clear-cut event which is claimed to be a result of a plot,” and systemic conspiracy theories, which “...focus on a particular group of conspirators who are accused of engineering a whole series of events in order to achieve their dark purposes or hold on to power.”²⁸⁹ QAnon’s extraordinarily complex machinations belie a relatively straightforward idea: Donald Trump and members of the military are working against a powerful group of Democrats who are Satanic pedophiles—often referred to as “global elites” or “globalists,” which are dog whistles that designate Jewish people.²⁹⁰ Indeed, QAnon has its roots in older Antisemitic conspiracy theories.²⁹¹ While the direct consequences of QAnon are palpable—its role in mainstreaming antisemitism and far-right politics, scaffolding the insurrection on January 6, and “tearing families apart”²⁹²—many indirect harms have emerged as well. One of these harms is that the normative, pathologizing approach to conspiracy theories has been solidified: QAnon has so saturated the political landscape in the United States that any

²⁸⁸ Rothschild, Mike. *The Storm Is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2021.

²⁸⁹ Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*.

²⁹⁰ Rensmann, Lars. “The Contemporary Globalization of Political Antisemitism: Three Political Spaces and the Global Mainstreaming of the ‘Jewish Question’ in the Twenty-First Century.” *Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism* 3, no. 1 (March 17, 2020): 83–108. <https://doi.org/10.26613/jca/3.1.46>.

²⁹¹ Deirdre Caputo-Levine and Jacob Harris, “Experiencing Relative Deprivation as True Crime: Applying Cultural Criminology to the Qanon Superconspiracy Theory,” *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology* 11 (April 20, 2022): 55–63, <https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2022.11.07>.

²⁹² Rothschild, *The Storm Is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything*.

and all phenomena that can be called a conspiracy theory are now, at least somewhat, associated with it. Due to this and other prominent conspiracy theories based in conservative ideologies, such as anti-vaccination theories, conspiracy theories are often listed alongside misinformation, extremism, polarization, and far-right ideologies,²⁹³ but often without any qualifying adjectives (e.g., “far-right conspiracy theories” or “antisemitic conspiracy theories”). Uncritically dismissing all conspiracy theories by virtue of their status as such can have dramatic chilling effects on the public sphere, even, and especially, on the Internet.

Generalism, Particularism and History

This section will begin with the work of three American academics whose writings on conspiracy theories have been foundational for all subsequent scholarship on the subject: Richard Hofstadter, Karl Popper, and Frederic Jameson. Hofstadter, a historian and public intellectual, is most often invoked as the historical precedent for studies of conspiracy theory in the United States. The prolific philosopher of science Karl Popper and his “conspiracy theory of society” is frequently cited by social scientists, especially philosophers of science and knowledge. Marxist political theorist and philosopher Frederic Jameson is the least frequently discussed in terms of foundational texts in the study of conspiracy theory, but his *cognitive mapping* approach has a lot to say to information studies.

Hofstadter’s 1964 essay, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*,²⁹⁴ is a seminal text in the study of conspiracy theory. In Hofstadter’s view, the “paranoid style” is a particular mode of perception and expression that regards conspiracies as motivating most significant historical events.²⁹⁵ He clarifies his use of the word *paranoid*: “In using the expression ‘paranoid style’ I am not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes. ... Of course this term is pejorative, and it is meant to be;

²⁹³ Massimiliano Demata and Virginia Zorzi, “The Languages and Anti-Languages of Health Communication in the Age of Conspiracy Theories, Mis/Disinformation and Hate Speech,” Università del Salento., 2022, <https://iris.unito.it/handle/2318/1868118>; Marwick and Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online.”

²⁹⁴ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.”

²⁹⁵ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 8.

the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than for good.”²⁹⁶ Hofstadter discusses his theory in relation to secret societies (the Masons and the Illuminati), conservative ideology, religion, and nativism. To him, “What distinguishes the paranoid style is not, then, the absence of verifiable facts...but rather the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events.”²⁹⁷ Analyzing Hofstadter’s work, Jovan Byford suggests that he slips back and forth between metaphorical and clinical use of the term “paranoid.”²⁹⁸ Similarly, Husting and Orr point out the slippage between describing actions and characterizing individuals: “Hofstadter shifts between describing actions and classifying persons. Despite his claims to focus on a rhetorical style, he sets up a simple equation between the terms conspiracy, paranoia, and irrationality. This equation typifies individuals and utterances; he discusses ‘the paranoid,’ ‘the militant leader,’ ‘the angry mind.’”²⁹⁹ In classifying different types of cognitive styles according to particular individual stereotypes, Hofstadter’s approach laid the the foundation upon which academics have continued to dismiss, ridicule, and pathologize conspiracy theory and conspiracy theorists in the decades since.³⁰⁰

In *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Karl Popper introduces “the conspiracy theory of society,” which he defines as “...the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed) and who have planned and conspired to bring it about.”³⁰¹ For Popper, the conspiracy theory of society put too much emphasis on human agency: if, as he argued, conspiracies are both uncommon and rarely successful, any truth value in conspiracy theories must likewise also be unlikely. Totalitarianism, Popper argued, grew out of conspiracy theories rooted in racist,

²⁹⁶ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 2.

²⁹⁷ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 37.

²⁹⁸ Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstroke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). 122.

²⁹⁹ Husting and Orr. “Dangerous Machinery: ‘Conspiracy Theorist’ as a Transpersonal Strategy of Exclusion.”

³⁰⁰ Skip Wilman, “Spinning Paranoia: The Ideologies of Conspiracy and Contingency in Postmodern Culture,” in *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, ed. Peter Knight (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2002), 21–39.

³⁰¹ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*, 5th ed., vol. 2 (London, UK: Routledge, 1974). 94.

nativist, and/or generally bigoted ideologies. For Popper, conspiracy theorizing is a manifestation of exactly the *opposite* of the aim of the social sciences—to discover truth.³⁰² Ostensibly, the goal of conspiracy theorizing is the same, but the normative orientation to research is different. Conspiracy theorizing posits too much human agency, that history can be planned out, whereas the social sciences examine the accidental, incidental, and unplanned aspects and consequences of historical events.³⁰³ In Popper’s words, as quoted by Michael Butter, “...even those [institutions and traditions] which arise as a result of conscious and intentional human actions are, as a rule, the *indirect, the unintended and often the unwanted by-products of such actions.*”³⁰⁴ Yet, history is not a series of accidents, just as it is also not a series of conspiracies. Charles Pigden challenges Popper’s view, suggesting that:

The belief that conspiracy theories are somehow superstitious is itself a superstition. Conspiracies abound—some successful, others not. They often play a role in the shaping of events...The conspiracy theory [Popper] denies is indeed false, but its falsehood casts no doubt on conspiracy theories of this or that event. Nor does Popper provide a decent argument for a generalized skepticism about conspiracies. Where the evidence suggests a conspiracy we are quite at liberty to believe in it.³⁰⁵

Pigden gives many examples of historical conspiracies, including the notorious COINTELPRO program, in which the FBI spied on members of the Black Panther and Communist parties, ultimately conspiring with the Chicago police to assassinate Black Panther leader Fred Hampton.³⁰⁶ Similarly, Gary Webb’s mid-1990s exposé of the connections between the Contras, the CIA, and the crack cocaine epidemic in Southern California was a true conspiracy, but he and other advocates of government accountability (like Maxine Waters) were accused by establishment media of being conspiracy theorists and thus dismissed.³⁰⁷ Disbelieving a conspiracy theory because conspiracies are supposedly unlikely means that true conspiracies like these may go unnoticed and the perpetrators unchallenged.

³⁰² Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*, 94-96.

³⁰³ Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*.

³⁰⁴ Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*, 21.

³⁰⁵ Charles Pigden, “Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong With Conspiracy Theories?,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 25, no. 1 (March 1, 1995): 3–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004839319502500101>.

³⁰⁶ Haas, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther*.

³⁰⁷ Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, 79.

Fredric Jameson famously introduced the notion that conspiracy theorizing is the “poor person’s cognitive mapping.” Fran Mason acknowledges the strangeness of the use of the colloquialism “poor person’s,” given that Jameson was a Marxist.³⁰⁸ She defines “cognitive mapping” as “...a means by which the individual subject can locate and structure perception of social and class relations in a world where the local no longer drives social, political, and cultural structures or allows the individual subject to make sense of his or her environment.”³⁰⁹ Conspiracy theorizing, therefore, is a thoroughly postmodern kind of cognitive mapping. At different points and perhaps with different theories, it produces a map of another world, a parallel world perhaps, constructed of misunderstandings of relationships,³¹⁰ perhaps mapping “...neither conspiracy nor society but...a map of itself and the subjectivity that created it.”³¹¹ The hegemony that creeps in with the use of the term “poor person’s” implicitly refers to knowledge and information in addition to class and status. Mason points out that Jameson is necessarily making a distinction between legitimate knowledge and illegitimate knowledge, or knowledge that is “real” and knowledge that is “ideological.” Indeed, within conspiracy theorist culture, knowledge functions as a unique kind of object:

...‘knowledge’ of the conspiracy seemingly gives the subject a position of independence and authenticity outside the domain of the conspiracy and its world of ignorance, control, and inauthenticity...The conspiracist ‘subject-outside-history’ sees him- or herself as free of the information systems controlled by the conspiracy, government, or secret society and sees subjects inside history and society as constructs of ‘alien’ information systems in which thoughts, values, and beliefs do not originate with the subject.”³¹²

Here, “information systems” is not used in the information-science technical sense; rather, Mason’s notion of an information system seems to refer to official stories or narratives, which take on many forms: media articles, collections of government documents, press releases, etc. From the conspiracy theorist’s perspective, people who believe the official story become a part of it, and thus are folded into the

³⁰⁸ Fran Mason, “A Poor Person’s Cognitive Mapping,” in *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, ed. Peter Knight (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2002), 45.

³⁰⁹ Mason, “A Poor Person’s Cognitive Mapping,” 41.

³¹⁰ Mason, “A Poor Person’s Cognitive Mapping,” 40.

³¹¹ Mason, “A Poor Person’s Cognitive Mapping,” 53.

³¹² Mason, “A Poor Person’s Cognitive Mapping,” 50.

supposed conspiracy itself, if involuntarily. Indeed, Mason posits that conspiracy theorists don't view their theories "...as narratives, but as histories..."³¹³ Taking the notion of epistemic power even further, Steve Fuller asks a Foucauldian question: are power and knowledge correlated, or is knowledge *intentionally* disseminated in order to distribute power? For Fuller, "...the latter possibility can be read as describing the motives or intentions of those who grant epistemic warrant, which, in an extreme form, would constitute a *conspiracy theory of knowledge*."³¹⁴ (my emphasis). Modeled after Popper's conspiracy theory of society, a conspiracy theory of knowledge might posit that significant knowledge claims or commonly accepted *facts* are orchestrated by people in power. For many conspiracy theorists, there are official, establishment histories, often sanctioned by the government, institutions, or scientific consensus, and then there are the counter-establishment histories, researched and presented by so-called conspiracy theorists.

Hofstadter, Popper, and Jameson all treat the phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing as a *prima facie* problem. Scholars like Jaron Harambam and Lance deHaven-Smith question this stance, asking whether or not this treatment of conspiracy theorizing as all-bad could be damaging in and of itself. Harambam problematizes Hofstadter and Popper's contributions to the canon of conspiracy theory scholarship, arguing that they established the trend of academics pathologizing people who believe in or research conspiracy theories, or what he calls "the pathology model." The pathology model studies conspiracy theories from the normative standpoint of their being "epistemologically, psychologically, and morally suspect."³¹⁵ DeHaven-Smith argues that using the label as a general put-down for individuals and groups of people who are suspicious of government damages democracy by solidifying the notion that elected officials never collude.³¹⁶ Certainly, politicians and others holding seats of power have often used the pejorative nature of the label "conspiracy theorist" to their advantage by branding critics as such.³¹⁷

³¹³ Mason, "A Poor Person's Cognitive Mapping," 44.

³¹⁴ Steve Fuller, *Social Epistemology*. 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 12.

³¹⁵ Harambam, "'The Truth Is Out There': Conspiracy Culture in an Age of Epistemic Instability," 11.

³¹⁶ Lance DeHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America*, 10.

³¹⁷ Lance DeHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America*, 9.

DeHaven-Smith devises an important point—that not all conspiracy theories should be labeled as such or considered on equal footing. The term “conspiracy theory” lumps many different kinds of suspicion, paranoia, and critique together, quickly becoming unwieldy.

Philosopher Matthew R.X. Dentith discusses this problem from a philosophical standpoint, designating the opposing viewpoints outlined above the *generalist* versus the *particularist*.³¹⁸ The generalists (Hofstadter, Popper, and Jameson) consider conspiracy theorizing in general to be irrational, believing that conspiracy theories can be assessed as a broad category of phenomena. Particularists (deHaven-Smith and Harambam), on the other hand, argue that conspiracy theories are varied, diverse, and should be considered on a case-by-case basis. In other words, conspiracy theories should not be dismissed by virtue of their status as such—they should be evaluated according to the evidence presented. Klein et al.³¹⁹ likewise differentiate between these two scholarly camps: the “monological” and what they call the “iceberg model.” The monological viewpoint considers conspiracists as a group that can be evaluated according to shared socio-psychological characteristics: “According to the monological account, individuals may begin with a particular instance of conspiratorial thinking. Then, through engagement with other ideas and through socialization with other conspiracy theorists, a particular mindset or worldview develops in which all historical and contemporary events can be explained in terms of hidden conspiracies.”³²⁰ The iceberg model, on the other hand, suggests that conspiracists that fit the monological viewpoint are just the tip of the iceberg—below the surface lie conspiracy theorists who are much more epistemically and psychologically heterogeneous. This dissertation aligns itself with that finding: in using the term “counter-establishment researcher,” I refer to a heterogeneous group whose members may display some of the same or similar epistemic characteristics but who need not display them all at once or necessarily strongly.

³¹⁸ Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, 32.

³¹⁹ Colin Klein, Peter Clutton, and Vince Polito, “Topic Modeling Reveals Distinct Interests within an Online Conspiracy Forum,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00189>.

³²⁰ Klein, Clutton, and Polito, “Topic Modeling Reveals Distinct Interests within an Online Conspiracy Forum,” 2.

Jovan Byford argues that the term “conspiracy theory” is itself “evaluative” and necessarily pejorative because of the ideological and political gravity of the phenomenon. Furthermore, he claims that the characteristics of conspiracy theorizing tend to remain stable over time, showing that the rhetoric and perspective of contemporary conspiracy theorists is not meaningfully different from those writing in the previous two centuries.³²¹ He goes on to characterize conspiracy theorize as consisting of “...a warped explanatory logic that is not amenable to rational debate. This is why conspiracy theories cannot be eradicated either through the creation of a more transparent government, or through any conventional means of persuasion...”³²² This is a comparatively narrow definition of conspiracy theories, taking a firm perspective on their rhetorical structure and how they function in society. Rob Brotherton similarly defines a “prototypical conspiracy theory” as “an unanswered question; it assumes nothing is as it seems; it portrays the conspirators as preternaturally competent; and as unusually evil; it is founded on anomaly hunting; and it is ultimately irrefutable.”³²³ If we define conspiracy theories as Byford and Brotherton do—in terms of their irrefutability, among other cultural and rhetorical characteristics—how can we discuss those phenomena that may not be so prototypical or do *not* contain Byford’s particular kind of “warped explanatory logic”? How do we spot a *real* conspiracy theory, rather than something that might be related to the phenomenon, displaying the same or similar characteristics?

Discerning Disciplinary Boundaries

The study of conspiracy theory is highly interdisciplinary, with scholars approaching the topic from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, political science, cultural studies, social science, and philosophy. I will attempt to summarize different disciplinary approaches in this section. Psychologists and social scientists frequently discuss conspiracy theorizing in terms of epistemology, with some, similar

³²¹ Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*, 5.

³²² Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*, 155.

³²³ Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds*, 11.

to Hofstadter, attempting to delineate a particular *epistemic style* of conspiracy theorizing. Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule argue that belief in conspiracy theories is caused by a “crippled epistemology” on the part of the conspiracist, which is a result of “...a sharply limited number of (relevant) informational resources.”³²⁴ Beyond the disturbingly ableist terminological choice, this perspective lacks nuance. What determines the relevance of an informational resource? Who has access to which resources? What role might epistemology actively play in such questions of access and relevance? Further, Sunstein and Vermeule go on to argue that “crippled epistemology” comes out of conspiracists producing knowledge within “isolated epistemic communities.”³²⁵ That is, conspiracists engage in information seeking and knowledge production within communities that are cut off from outside epistemic influences. This assumption is disproven by the mere presence of counter-establishment researchers in libraries and archives, as I show in this dissertation and in my previous work.³²⁶

Research that is carried out by psychologists and/or published in psychological journals tends to ask the question *why do people believe in conspiracy theories?*³²⁷, answering such questions with psychological effects and cognitive styles. Illusory pattern perception, for example, is one prominent feature repeatedly identified as a feature of conspiracy theorizing: that is, finding or perceiving patterns in random events.³²⁸ Similarly, alongside belief in the paranormal, belief in conspiracies is also associated with greater susceptibility to the conjunction fallacy, which is “...a specific error of probabilistic reasoning whereby people overestimate the likelihood of co-occurring events.”³²⁹ Psychologists also posit

³²⁴ Sunstein and Vermeule, “Conspiracy Theories,” 204.

³²⁵ Matthew R.X. Dentith, “When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation,” *Social Epistemology* 30, no. 5–6 (2016): 572–91, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2016.1172362>, 576.

³²⁶ Eadon, “(Not) Part of the System: Resolving Epistemic Disconnect Through Archival Reference.”

³²⁷ Karen M. Douglas, Aleksandra Cichocka, and Robbie M. Sutton, “Motivations, Emotions and Belief in Conspiracy Theories,” in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight, 1st ed. (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 181–91, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429452734-2_3.

³²⁸ Reine C. van der Wal et al., “Suspicious Binds: Conspiracy Thinking and Tenuous Perceptions of Causal Connections between Co-Occurring and Spuriously Correlated Events,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 7 (2018): 970–89, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2507>.; Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Karen M. Douglas, and Clara De Inocencio, “Connecting the Dots: Illusory Pattern Perception Predicts Belief in Conspiracies and the Supernatural,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 3 (2018): 320–35, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2331>.; Whitson and Galinsky. “Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception.”

³²⁹ Robert Brotherton and Christopher C. French, “Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Susceptibility to the Conjunction Fallacy,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 28, no. 2 (2014): 238–48, <https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.2995>.

that conspiracy theorists have a tendency to detect agency where there is none, or there is little, otherwise known as *hypersensitive agency detection* (HAD).³³⁰ Douglas, Cichocka, and Sutton group such effects into types of “social psychological motives”: “These motives are epistemic (e.g. the desire for understanding, accuracy and subjective certainty), existential (e.g. the desire for control and security) and social (e.g. the desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group...).”³³¹ According to psychologists, discomfort with persistent uncertainty may also play a role in the development of conspiracy belief.³³²

A significant aspect of this dissertation is to investigate the emotions experienced by people investigating so-called “conspiracy theories” at a variety of points in the research process, as well as the more general question of what it feels like to be called or treated as a conspiracy theorist. Some work has been done in psychology on conspiracy theory and emotion. In discussing the entertainment value of conspiracy theories, van Prooijen suggests that “...entertaining qualities of conspiracy theories are likely associated with *intense* emotional experiences that can be negative, positive, or both, in valence.”³³³ That is, the intensity of the emotional experience is what creates and sustains the entertainment value of a conspiracy theory. Oettingen et al. suggest that the “epistemic structure” of *misplaced certainty* is “...a subjective sense of certainty about something that one perceives as doubted or opposed, either by oneself or by others.”³³⁴ The authors go on to posit that misplaced certainty can be considered a key factor in people taking action because of their belief in a given conspiracy theory.

Binnedyk and Pennycook found that intuition figures more prominently in conspiracy theorists’ cognitive styles than in others’, concluding that people who believe in conspiracies do so because they do

³³⁰ Karen M. Douglas et al., “Someone Is Pulling the Strings: Hypersensitive Agency Detection and Belief in Conspiracy Theories,” *Thinking & Reasoning* 22, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 57–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13546783.2015.1051586>.

³³¹ Douglas, Cichocka, and Sutton. “Motivations, Emotions and Belief in Conspiracy Theories.”

³³² Prooijen and Jostmann. “Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Influence of Uncertainty and Perceived Morality.”

³³³ Jan-Willem van Prooijen et al., “The Entertainment Value of Conspiracy Theories,” *British Journal of Psychology* 113, no. 1 (2022): 25–48, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12522>. 27.

³³⁴ Gabriele Oettingen et al., “Misplaced Certainty in the Context of Conspiracy Theories,” *Current Opinion in Psychology*, June 13, 2022, 101393, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101393>. 4.

not think analytically, relying too heavily on their intuition instead.³³⁵ Going beyond this, Roberts and Risen introduce a new term: *conspiracy intuitions*: “...the subjective sense that an event or circumstance is not adequately explained or accounted for by existing narratives, potentially for nefarious reasons...”³³⁶ The authors delineate conspiracy intuitions as a first step in the adoption of conspiracy beliefs. Wood introduces the notion of conspiracy *suspicions*, which he defines as a kind of steppingstone from generalized conspiracist ideation towards specific conspiracy beliefs. Using his example, he shows that the general belief that conspiracies are common might lead to a suspicion that we are being lied to about what happened on September 11th, 2001, which *could* grow into a belief that there was a controlled demolition of the twin towers.³³⁷

Psychological studies of conspiracy theory place implicit value judgements on reason over intuition and trust in authorities over suspicion of them. Further, the focus is on the figure of the conspiracy *theorist*, rather than that of the conspiracy theory, the socio-cultural contexts in which conspiracy theories are constructed, and/or their wider, systemic causes and effects. Labeling conspiracy beliefs and research expertise as being undergirded by a certain type of *intuition(s)* ignores the potential research value of intuition as a concept. Decidedly narrow in scope definitionally, Rebecca Coleman’s notion of intuition is helpful here. She establishes the methodological value of intuition by adapting Henri Bergson’s metaphysical notion of intuition—moving around an object, entering into an object—into a way to conceptualize social scientific method. For Coleman, “An intuitive method...is a relation of intimacy between the researcher(s) and researched in which the dichotomy between subject/object, body/image is reconceived...The ‘entering into’ the object that a method of intuition implies is a relation of intimacy between the researcher(s) and researched, indeed, the relation of intimacy *produces* the

³³⁵ Jabin Binnendyk and Gordon Pennycook, “Intuition, Reason, and Conspiracy Beliefs,” *Current Opinion in Psychology*, June 8, 2022, 101387, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101387>.

³³⁶ Russell Roberts and Jane L. Risen, “Introducing Conspiracy Intuitions to Better Understand Conspiracy Beliefs,” *Current Opinion in Psychology*, June 16, 2022, 101395, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101395>. 4.

³³⁷ Michael J. Wood, “Conspiracy Suspicions as a Proxy for Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories: Implications for Theory and Measurement,” *British Journal of Psychology* 108, no. 3 (August 2017): 507–27, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12231>.

researcher(s) and researched.”³³⁸ I will return to Coleman’s notion of intuition in Chapter 3. For now, I want to draw attention to the idea that, especially in cases where research subjects exist (such as in circumstances where counter-establishment researchers are interviewing people), intuition is a valuable force by which to create and nurture relationships with interviewees. While this does not map directly onto the notion of *conspiracy intuitions*, it does bring into question the idea that intuition is a stronger force in conspiracy theorists’ thinking patterns, which itself places a negative value judgment on intuition, and a positive value judgment on analytic thinking. Further, arguing that conspiracy theorists hold *misplaced certainty* about their topic also ignores the potential that some people have gained their certainty in a given theory through actual research. It also, once again, begs the question: who determines where certainty should be “placed”?

In contrast, some social scientists acknowledge the parallels between social scientific research and research into conspiracy theories. Waters explores conspiracy theorizing in the Black community as a sort of amateur sociological inquiry or *ethnoscology*, an everyday practice in which people theorize about social circumstances and phenomena.³³⁹ Emma A. Jane and Chris Fleming have characterized conspiracy theorizing as a kind of “folk sociology.”³⁴⁰ Harambam and Aupers argue that conspiracy theorists resist scientific dogma by redefining and reshaping the boundaries of scientific knowledge, “compet[ing] with (social) scientists in complex battles for epistemic authority...”³⁴¹ In many ways, theorizing conspiracies is one way to subvert authoritative systems and institutions, especially those that are acutely dismissive of what they perceive and label as “irrational.” Conspiracy theorizing can even be

³³⁸ Rebecca Coleman, “A Method of Intuition: Becoming, Relationality, Ethics,” *History of the Human Sciences* 21, no. 4 (November 2008): 104–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695108095514>. 2.

³³⁹ Anita M. Waters, “Conspiracy Theories as Ethnoscologies: Explanation and Intention in African American Political Culture,” *Journal of Black Studies* 28, no. 1 (September 1, 1997): 112–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002193479702800107>.

³⁴⁰ Emma A. Jane and Chris Fleming, *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

³⁴¹ Harambam and Aupers, “Contesting Epistemic Authority: Conspiracy Theories on the Boundaries of Science,” 466.

considered a *justifiable* reaction to decreased control over knowledge caused by the division of labor. Jane and Fleming argue:

...we live in an age in which the vast bulk of knowledge can only be accessed in mediated forms which rely on the testimony of various specialists. Contemporary approaches to epistemology, however, remain anchored in the intellectual ideas of the Enlightenment. These demand *first-hand inquiry, independent thinking, and a skepticism about information passed down by authorities and experts*. As such, we may find ourselves attempting to use epistemological schema radically unsuited to a world whose staggering material complexity involves an unprecedented degree of specialization and knowledge mediation.³⁴²

Through this framing, we might regard modern conspiracy theorizing as having exaggerated the epistemic features of the Enlightenment: from Enlightenment skepticism to modern mistrust of authority; from privileging first-hand inquiry and independent thinking to sole reliance on one's own observations and rejection of most, if not all, mediated information. Jane and Fleming's ideas evoke Michael Buckland's notion of contemporary society as a document society (in contrast to the oft-invoked "information society"), in which humans rely on increasingly mediated forms of information, often in the form of documents.³⁴³ The tradeoff for more leisure time³⁴⁴ and more informational resources is that a given individual has less control over his or her informational environment. Whitson and Galinsky's finding that inducing a lack of control results in an increase of illusory pattern perception, including "...seeing images in noise, forming illusory correlations in stock market information, perceiving conspiracies, and developing superstitions,"³⁴⁵ is also relevant here. Confusion and feelings of being out of control can thus have a massive impact on pattern perception. Whitson and Galinsky's findings complement Jane and Fleming's³⁴⁶ suggestion that the more knowledge is mediated through documentary means, the less control individuals have and the more suspicious or skeptical they might become.

Conspiracist mistrust of authority figures and institutions goes hand-in-hand with an overreliance on first-hand observation and experience. In other words, "...authority is displaced to the self, as the

³⁴² Jane and Fleming, *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid*, 54; my emphasis.

³⁴³ Michael Buckland, *Information and Society* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2017), 11.

³⁴⁴ In certain places and for certain classes of people, that is.

³⁴⁵ Whitson and Galinsky, "Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception," 115.

³⁴⁶ Jane and Fleming, *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid*, 54.

individual subject as the arbiter and final court of all knowledge claims”³⁴⁷ Such overreliance or overconfidence in one’s own observations, memories, and knowledge can lead to characteristic *confirmatory reasoning*, otherwise known as confirmation bias (the tendency to fit new information into one’s extant worldview or narrative). Indeed, Freeman and Freeman go as far as to link this style of reasoning directly to generalized suspicion: “...even at the mildest end of the paranoid spectrum, there’s a clear link between a confirmatory style of reasoning and suspicious thoughts.”³⁴⁸ Confirmatory reasoning can have a profound effect on information seeking styles. Carol C. Kuhlthau, in the framework she devised to support her Information Search Process (ISP) model, cites George Kelly’s indicative and invitational moods as part of her framework: “Kelly describes two attitudes, referred to as moods, which an individual may assume during the phases of construction: invitational, which leaves the person open to new ideas and receptive to change and adjustment according to what is encountered; and indicative, which causes the person to depend on the construct he or she presently holds and to reject new information and ideas.”³⁴⁹ Extrapolating from this, it may seem as though indicative mood is related to confirmatory reasoning. However, we must caution ourselves as scholars to avoid assuming that all counter-establishment researchers tend towards the indicative mood when doing research. Most research on conspiracy theories indeed treats theories as implausible, pathologizing those who believe in them: “Scholars and journalists alike simply assume that conspiracy theories are flawed understandings of how reality works, and start their analyses and interpretations from that assumption.”³⁵⁰ This assumption results in a pejorative use of the term and pathologization of people who engage with such topics, which can push them farther away from academic practices of critique and critical thinking.

One criticism leveled against Kuhlthau and other behavioral scholars of information seeking—that their analysis ignored social and structural context(s)—can also be applied to psychological studies of

³⁴⁷ Jane and Fleming, *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid*, 47-48.

³⁴⁸ Daniel J. Freeman and Jason Freeman, *Paranoia: The 21st Century Fear* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 120.

³⁴⁹ Kuhlthau, “Inside the Search Process: Information Seeking from the User’s Perspective,” 363.

³⁵⁰ Harambam, “‘The Truth Is Out There’: Conspiracy Culture in an Age of Epistemic Instability,” 10.

conspiracy theory. Conceptualizing conspiracy theories as a social ill that must be investigated on the individual, behavioral level ignores the myriad layers that come together to create this sociocultural knowledge-production practice. One such layer is the study and pathologization of conspiracy theories by psychologists and social scientists itself. Nefes and Romero-Roche argue that through the noticing of patterns and drawing of connections, sociology can be considered a kind of conspiracy theorizing, just as conspiracy theorizing, as Jane and Fleming put it, can be considered “folk sociology.” Extrapolating from these parallels, they suggest that there are likely feedback loops between sociology and conspiracy theory.³⁵¹ Further, Nefes and Romero-Roche point out that academics and journalists who criticize, explain, debunk, pathologize, and/or otherwise research and write about conspiracy theories, in whatever capacity, are disseminating them in some fashion.³⁵² The authors go on to quote Ho and Jin³⁵³: “It is impossible to totally dissociate sociological theory from conspiracy theory. Would it not be conceivable that sociology feeds the imaginary of conspiracy and is fed back by it? Such is, in fact, the question that conspiracy theory raises: any condemnation of it leads to its acknowledgement.”³⁵⁴ Harambam traces such approaches directly back to Popper and Hofstadter, whose work “...firmly set the scene for subsequent research by making conspiracy theories epistemologically, psychologically and morally suspect.”³⁵⁵ In the course of studying conspiracy theory as social scientists, we often conceptualize and pathologize the conspiracy theorist as *Other*, just as they may (though not always) conceptualize an *Other* (Jewish people, the government, Big Pharma, Big Tech, Congress, etc.) and blame social ills on them. This Other can sometimes be the *academic elites* ourselves. Just as we other them, they other us: “Conspiracy theories

³⁵¹ Türkay Salim Nefes and Alejandro Romero-Reche, “Sociology, Social Theory and Conspiracy Theory,” in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight, 1st ed. (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2020.: Routledge, 2020), 94–107, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429452734-1_7. 95.

³⁵² Nefes and Romero-Reche, “Sociology, Social Theory and Conspiracy Theory,” 95.

³⁵³ Park Jung Ho and Chun Sang Jin, “The Conspiracy Theory: A Travesty of the Social Sciences?,” *Societes* 112, no. 2 (n.d.): 147–61.

³⁵⁴ Ho and Jin, “The Conspiracy Theory.”

³⁵⁵ Harambam, “‘The Truth Is Out There’: Conspiracy Culture in an Age of Epistemic Instability.” 11.

are...framed as the irrational and extremist opposite of modern science and of democracy. They are, in the eyes of such scholars, our pathological Other.”³⁵⁶

Discerning the epistemic style employed by many conspiracy theorists is challenging to say the least: Is it premodern Enlightenment epistemology, “radically unsuited to our modern age,” as Jane and Fleming argue? Or is the ultimate postmodern style of reasoning? Are conspiracy theorists wholly irrational or hyperrational?³⁵⁷ Arguments for the fundamental irrationality of conspiracy theories often rely on science as the ultimate rational form of human knowledge, of which conspiracy theories are a foil.³⁵⁸ Yet, as scholars of Science and Technology Studies (STS) like Bruno Latour show, science is not a perfected category of knowledge that presents the truth cut from whole cloth: like all other forms of knowledge, it is constructed by humans and thus has embedded within it “...a wide network of research practices, validation structures, professional networks, political dynamics, [and] competition...”³⁵⁹ that creates it. On the other hand, conspiracy theories could also be considered to be (hyper) rational. Nefes and Romero-Roche contend that:

...faced with an overabundance of data, individuals “can easily be tempted into constructing a representation of the world which is comfortable rather than true” (Bronner 2013: 33). Adopting a rational strategy, we pick the theories that entail an affordable cognitive cost. The end of grand narratives and the prevalence of representations over reality, two of the recurring themes in postmodern social theory, call for new, “outsider” meta-narratives displacing the teleological myth of progress (scientific or otherwise), the re-signification of symbols (Josset 2015) and the fictionalisation of social reality...³⁶⁰

The authors go on to argue that the modern nation-state also imbues conspiracy theorizing with specific fodder in its large-scale “tensions and discontinuities.” For Nefes and Romero-Roche, then, conspiracy theorizing is *the* postmodern form of information processing and knowledge production. It makes a certain amount of rational sense in our current, late-capitalist socio-political environment.

³⁵⁶ Harambam, “‘The Truth Is Out There’: Conspiracy Culture in an Age of Epistemic Instability.” 19.

³⁵⁷ Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*.

³⁵⁸ Harambam and Aupers, “Contesting Epistemic Authority.”

³⁵⁹ Jaron Harambam, “Against Modernist Illusions: Why We Need More Democratic and Constructivist Alternatives to Debunking Conspiracy Theories,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 25, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 104–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2021.1886424>, 113.

³⁶⁰ Nefes and Romero-Reche, “Sociology, Social Theory and Conspiracy Theory,” 102.

The role of uncertainty and the unknown cannot be overstated in the context of counter-establishment research and/ or conspiracy theorizing. As we saw in Section I., uncertainty plays a significant role in research itself: in many circumstances, the desire for research is triggered by feelings of uncertainty or an encounter with the unknown, prompting a desire for knowledge. Several experimental and observational psychological studies have examined the role of uncertainty in conspiracy theorizing, arguing that increased uncertainty results in increased tendency to theorize conspiracies.³⁶¹ Husting and Orr suggest that a pervasive culture of fear in the United States, taken together with information environments that are oversaturated with different kinds of information of varying quality, results in a wider environment that is characterized by feelings of uncertainty.³⁶² As Jodi Dean puts it, “We’re linked into a world of uncertainties, a world where more information is always available, and hence, a world where we face daily the fact that our truths, diagnoses, and understandings are incomplete.”³⁶³ Wood argues that paranormal and conspiracy beliefs can be one way to respond to and resolve ambiguity or confusion.³⁶⁴ It is important to note the role of uncertainty in research, in conspiracy theory, and in paranormal belief; all three are central to the work of this dissertation.

Another strain of research on conspiracy theories, which comes out of cultural studies, examines the effects of discourses *about* conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists, recalling the notion that there is a feedback loop between academic perspectives on conspiracy theories and the theories themselves. Harambam questions the normative orientation of social scientists to the topic of conspiracy theorizing:

And who decides what is true and what is false, the scholar? The same counts for paranoia: how to empirically distinguish between what some academics have called “healthy” or “critical paranoia” and “pathological” or “excessive” paranoia (Harper, 2008; Kellner, 2003; Robins and Post, 1997)? And what about the (alleged) dangers of conspiracy theories? Yes, paranoid beliefs may very well result in disastrous atrocities: the historical evidence these scholars put forward is both convincing and terrifying. However, reading Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2010[1944]), Hannah Arendt (2006[1963]), and Zygmunt Bauman (2000) one could easily make

³⁶¹ van Prooijen and Jostmann, “Belief in Conspiracy Theories.”

³⁶² Husting and Orr, “Dangerous Machinery.”

³⁶³ Jodi Dean, “Theorizing Conspiracy Theory,” *Theory & Event* 4, no. 3 (2000), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/32599>.

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³⁶⁴ Michael J. Wood, “Conspiracy Suspicions as a Proxy for Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories.”

equally convincing arguments that rational science and instrumental reason are just as perilous to democratic societies.³⁶⁵

Using similar reasoning, Pigden asserts that everyone who is politically, academically, and historically informed must be a conspiracy theorist themselves, merely because history, and the news, is rife with conspiracies.³⁶⁶ Again, take the circumstances of the attempted coup at the capitol on January 6—the Congressional hearings show that Donald Trump was part of a calculated conspiracy to overthrow the United States government.³⁶⁷ If everyone is a conspiracy theorist, then the label loses much of its epistemic power.

Husting and Orr put forth the idea that labeling people as conspiracy theorists is a systematic way to exclude them from public discourse: “The label functions symbolically, protecting certain decisions and people from question in areas of political, cultural, and scholarly knowledge construction...[the label] can deflect attention from claims at hand and shift discourse to the nature of the claimant.”³⁶⁸ Indeed, this may be why it seems so easy for psychological studies of conspiracy theorists to function as the dominant way to discuss conspiracy theories in an academic context, because it is so easy to shift between the idea and the purveyor or believer in the idea. Like others, Husting and Orr argue that conspiracy theorizing is a form of sense-making and knowledge construction. Having analyzed both journalistic and scholarly approaches to the term *conspiracy theorists*, Husting and Orr ultimately suggest that academic work must “...engage with the micropolitics of the term. While [work in cultural studies] has shown us the importance of cultural contexts for understanding many different kinds of phenomena, it must *also* attend more systematically to the micropolitics of the term: its ability to reflexively tarnish identities of widely disparate claimants and to place limits on what can be uttered in the public sphere.”³⁶⁹ In all scholarly inquiry into conspiracy theories, the authors argue, the term itself and its discursive power must be

³⁶⁵ Harambam, “‘The Truth Is Out There’: Conspiracy Culture in an Age of Epistemic Instability,” 20.

³⁶⁶ Pigden, “Are Conspiracy Theorists Epistemically Vicious?”

³⁶⁷ Kevin Breuninger, “Jan. 6 Probe’s First Hearing Accused Trump of Fueling Election Conspiracy. Here’s What’s Coming Next,” CNBC, June 10, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/06/10/jan-6-hearing-alleges-trump-election-conspiracy-heres-whats-next.html>.

³⁶⁸ Husting and Orr, “Dangerous Machinery,” 8.

³⁶⁹ Husting and Orr, “Dangerous Machinery,” 31.

examined and discussed. Without doing so, scholars risk contributing to the systematic othering of people who engage with conspiracy theories and other counter-establishment areas of research, potentially removing them further from sites of intellectual and institutional engagement.

When people are treated as different, they become different—again in Husting and Orr’s words, “...researchers in social sciences often engage in othering: people become ‘objects’ of the knowing, scholarly gaze and are positioned as ‘different,’ which accomplishes or performs their difference.”³⁷⁰ We can analyze this phenomenon through Ian Hacking’s notion of *looping human kinds*. For Hacking, “To create new ways of classifying people is also to change how we can think of ourselves, to change our sense of self-worth, even how we remember our own past. This in turn generates a looping effect, because people of the kind behave differently and so are different. That is to say the kind changes...”³⁷¹ Classifying people according to their epistemic viewpoints and making value judgements about those viewpoints solely because they differ from our own solidifies conspiracy theorists’ identities as outsiders. Bowker and Star make a similar argument, giving the example of a witch to convey the notion of a looping human kind: “If someone is taken to be a witch, and an elaborate technical apparatus with which to diagnose her or him as such is developed, then the reality of witchcraft obtains in the consequences—perhaps death at the stake.”³⁷² Replace “witch” with “conspiracy theorist” and “death at the stake” with “epistemic ostracism” and the problem of classifying conspiracy theorists as such emerges.

Harambam also discusses how conspiracy theories are talked about by academics and journalists: “...because some disturbed extremists hold conspiracy theories dear, all conspiracy theorists must be disturbed and dangerously extremist as well. But this *pars pro toto* reasoning—the part is taken for the whole—obscures the diversity that can be expected to exist among conspiracy theorists and leaves us with uniform stereotypes but no real understanding of the contemporary appeal of conspiracy theories.”³⁷³ We

³⁷⁰ Husting and Orr, “Dangerous Machinery,” 11.

³⁷¹ Ian Hacking, *The Looping Effects of Human Kinds* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 369.

³⁷² Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999). 290.

³⁷³ Harambam, “‘The Truth Is Out There’: Conspiracy Culture in an Age of Epistemic Instability,” 11.

can see this happening in the last few years with QAnon—because of this particular theory’s pervasiveness and destructiveness, it has become so famous and so harmful that it seems to make every conspiracy theory “evil” and “extremely harmful” by association. Many contemporary liberal and leftist discussions of conspiracy theories insist on a zero-tolerance policy, dismissing and denouncing them *all* as a way to dismiss and denounce QAnon and other far-right, high-harm conspiracy theories *specifically*. In the age of QAnon, refusing to condemn all conspiracy theories risks being seen as a QAnon apologist. In such a way, it can be helpful to qualify the term “conspiracy theory” with “extremist” or “far-right.”

Bratich offers another perspective on the discursive milieu around conspiracy theories. He characterizes the term *conspiracy theory* as “a bridge term” that unites pejorative, Hofstadter-esque ideas such as political paranoia and the paranoid style with more investigative attempts at understanding conspiracy theory, including *conspiracy research*. It is therefore necessary to define where one stands on that bridge. He only mentions conspiracy research in passing as one way to approach the study of conspiracy theory. The term “...attempts to authorize and legitimize the knowledge claims of the enterprise. Calling it 'research' obviously tries to give the accounts intellectual grounding in social science or journalism. It is often used interchangeably with *political* research and *investigative* research. In a sense, it takes the existence of conspiracies to be true and studies their occurrence and effects much as one would study policy and political institutions.”³⁷⁴ My own attempt to circumvent the thorniness of the term by coining *counter-establishment research* allows for engagement with people who research the topics at hand without necessarily passing a value judgment on them by labeling them as conspiracy theorists.

For Bratich, the definitional confusion surrounding the term conspiracy theory contributes to its discursive destructiveness and staying power, creating and sustaining what he terms *conspiracy panics*. Conspiracy panics are moral panics over the prevalence of conspiracy theories. The inexact nature of the term “conspiracy theory” gives it contextual flexibility: it can be applied to a variety of worldviews,

³⁷⁴ Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, 5.

topics, and styles of thought, and thus wielded in a variety of circumstances.³⁷⁵ Bratich also argues that conspiracy theories are litmus tests not for society at large and its values necessarily, but for the “dominant forms of rationality that are so enraptured with [conspiracy theories] as problems...”³⁷⁶ He goes on to argue that

...the concern over conspiracy theories (old and new) is closely linked to panics over extremist political activity. From the scares over communists and Birchites in the 1960s to the alarm over militias and terrorists since the mid 1990s, public discussions have intertwined a form of thought (irrational conspiracy theories) with a form of political activity (extremism). In doing so, knowledges are presented as inherently dangerous, certain styles of dissent are disqualified, and new forms of consent are forged.³⁷⁷

Some conspiracy theories are, without a doubt, linked to violent extremism—but not all of them, and it is not a feature of conspiracy theories as a supposed “style of thought.”

In the book *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism*, Amanda Montell discusses how the term “cult” has largely lost its utility, stating that the word “has become so sensationalized, so romanticized, that many experts I spoke to don’t even use it anymore. Their stance is that the meaning of cult is too broad or too subjective to be useful, at least in academic literature. As recently as the 1990s, scholars had no problem tossing around the term to describe any group ‘considered by many to be deviant.’”³⁷⁸ The parallels between the term *cult* and *conspiracy theory* are evident (deviance, othering, etc.), but while academics have moved away from using “cult,” those of us who study conspiracy theories are still using the term, even though many have recognized its loss of utility. Coady advocates for cessation of the term:

The goal would be to create a world in which the expressions “conspiracy theorist,” “conspiracy theory,” “conspiracism,” and so on, would be recognized as products of an irrational and bigoted outlook. In this world, people would be ashamed to dismiss a view on the grounds that it is a conspiracy theory, or a person on the grounds that he or she is a conspiracy theorist, as they would be to dismiss a view on the grounds that it is heretical, or a person on the grounds that he or she is a witch.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁵ Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, 12.

³⁷⁶ Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, 19.

³⁷⁷ Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, 25.

³⁷⁸ Amanda Montell, *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism* (New York, NY: Harper Wave, 2021), 32.

³⁷⁹ Coady, *What to Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues*, 126.

What *should* be dismissed, however, would be extremism, hate, and calls for violence; condemnable actions that may, or may not, be associated with a given conspiracy theory.

Subjugated knowledge and its production

The counter-establishment topics at hand in this study may be viewed through the Foucauldian lens of *subjugated knowledges*. Foucault introduces the idea of subjugated knowledges in *Power/Knowledge*: “By ‘subjugated knowledges’ one should understand something else...namely a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to the task or insufficiently elaborated; naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.”³⁸⁰ He goes on to say that criticism itself emerges from the foundations of such subjugated knowledges.³⁸¹ Counter-establishment research areas—cum—conspiracy theories can be considered a form of subjugated knowledge in that it is often dismissed as inherently wrong or irrational.³⁸² Many people are dismissed or ostracized by virtue of their belief in or research on conspiracy theories. Importantly, Foucault contrasts subjugated knowledges with *official knowledges*, or those hegemonic knowledges that are widely accepted and often ingrained in our systems of information organization. These three areas of counter-establishment research, as subjugated knowledges, define themselves in opposition to official knowledges.

Bratich engages with the framing of subjugated knowledges to talk about conspiracy theories, as well:

Studying conspiracy theories as subjugated knowledges would demonstrate how some accounts become dominant only through struggle. An official account comes to *be* official only through a victory over, and erasure of conflict with, conspiracy accounts. Among the competing accounts

³⁸⁰ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1980). 82.

³⁸¹ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, 82.

³⁸² Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*; Quassim Cassam, “The Intellectual Character of Conspiracy Theorists,” *Aeon*, March 13, 2015, <https://aeon.co/essays/the-intellectual-character-of-conspiracy-theorists>.

for any event, the official version is not merely the winner in a game of truth—it determines who the players can be.³⁸³

The power of knowledge determines not only what can be considered *true* but also who can engage in the production of knowledge and who can make legitimate knowledge claims. The hegemony of official knowledges can in fact be the instigator for isolated epistemic communities. When a group of people whose membership is determined by epistemic commonalities, like counter-establishment researchers, are treated with disdain, insulted, and uncritically dismissed, they become less and less likely to listen to voices and narratives that challenge their own.

What differentiates subjugated knowledge production from knowledge production? Debates about science and pseudoscience can shed some light on this question, particularly in the context of counter-establishment research. Differentiating between science and pseudoscience is one of the age-old problems of the philosophy of science and the sociology of knowledge. The difficulty of defining the line between science and pseudoscience is known as “the demarcation problem.”³⁸⁴ Terence Hines, in *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal*, argues that the demarcation problem is, in fact, straightforward, that a pseudoscience is simply a dogma that masquerades as a science. Hines gives several ways to “spot” a pseudoscience. First, its hypothesis is impossible to falsify: no evidence could possibly refute the hypothesis. Second, related, the supporters or believers in the pseudoscientific claim do not conduct “careful, controlled experiments that would demonstrate the existence of the phenomenon.”³⁸⁵ Similarly, they do not change their hypotheses when presented with new evidence.³⁸⁶ Third, pseudoscientists are often interested in mysterious, unexplained phenomena, placing the burden of proof on skeptics. Hines also claims that pseudoscientists use myth and legend to back up their claims. Similar to the label of

³⁸³ Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*.

³⁸⁴ Michael D. Gordin, *On the Fringe: Where Science Meets Pseudoscience* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021).

³⁸⁵ Terence Hines, *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal*, 2nd ed. (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2003), 15.

³⁸⁶ Hines, *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal*, 19.

conspiracy theory, the *pseudoscience* label is both always pejorative,³⁸⁷ and, as a rule, flattens a group of heterogeneous counter-establishment and/or conspiratorial topics into one category.³⁸⁸

Popper coined the term *demarcation problem*, and his main criterion, falsifiability, continues to be the most common way that scientists distinguish themselves from pseudoscientists, as we saw with Hines. Gordin, however, argues that falsifiability ultimately fails as a criterion with which to demarcate pseudoscience. According to Gordin, Popper formulated his demarcation criteria specifically to exclude Psychoanalysis and Marxism, which had been thought of as sciences in the Viennese context in which he worked. Accidentally, Popper also excluded the “‘historical’ natural sciences, such as evolutionary biology, geology, or cosmology—those fields where we cannot ‘run the tape again’ in the laboratory...Those sciences provide pervasive explanations of nature through the totality of a narrative chain of causal inference rather than a series of empirical, yes-no votes.”³⁸⁹ Furthermore, the demarcation criterion of falsifiability fails because it means that any claim can be considered scientific as long as it is accompanied by a piece of evidence that, were it to be presented, would falsify the claim. Indeed, “Popper’s criterion does not fringe out many of the doctrines that common usage would demand of it. One the contrary: creationists and ufologists often quote Popper to assert their own positions are scientific and those of their opponents are pseudoscientific.”³⁹⁰

As Gordin implies, counter-establishment researchers and their skeptics are often deeply enmeshed with one another, locked in a debate that is often explicitly *about* the demarcation problem. Even outside of the realm of science, the demarcation problem becomes one of *legitimate* versus *illegitimate* questions, areas of inquiry, and knowledges. Pseudoscience can be considered as being at least partly constituted by debunking narratives, their intolerance for differences, rigid epistemology, and

³⁸⁷ Gordin, *On the Fringe: Where Science Meets Pseudoscience*, 90.

³⁸⁸ Gordin, *On the Fringe: Where Science Meets Pseudoscience*, 14.

³⁸⁹ Gordin, *On the Fringe: Where Science Meets Pseudoscience*, 7.

³⁹⁰ Gordin, *On the Fringe: Where Science Meets Pseudoscience*, 8.

moralized and gendered boundary work.³⁹¹ Hines, for example, a fellow at the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, himself often employs an us-versus-them rhetoric: “Science changes so rapidly, it is frequently difficult to keep up with the changes even in one’s own field. This is in contrast, of course, to the pseudoscientists, whose theories almost never change. Again, if one looks at the actual *behavior* of scientists and pseudoscientists, it is clear which is really the more open-minded of the two groups.”³⁹² Jane and Fleming point out that much of the conspiracy literature considers debunkers, many of whom are academics, to be slightly outside of, and metaphorically above, conspiracy theorists themselves. These debunkers are often under-examined and under-theorized, as opposed to conspiracy discourses, which are arguably *over*-studied. Jane and Fleming ultimately argue that debunking is itself a *part* of conspiracy discourse, not separate from and superior to it.³⁹³ Further, they point out that debunkers and conspiracy theorists often mimic one another, working in parallel and echoing each other. Gordin points to this as well when he says that “Counterestablishments mirror establishments; sometimes the mirroring goes both ways.”³⁹⁴ Indeed, Don C. Donderi argues that evaluating UFO evidence using the frameworks of law and military intelligence is more productive than using science; these two frameworks “highlight the weaknesses of the scientific method;” and further, that “The critical, empirical attitude of a skilled attorney and the alertness and open-mindedness of a military intelligence analyst will both produce a clearer understanding of the UFO evidence than the theory-driven closed-mindedness of the professional scientist.”³⁹⁵ This is partly because science does not have structures by which to analyze Foucault’s *inaccessible domain of nothingness*, which is so prominent in the mysteries surrounding UFO studies and other counter-establishment areas of research.³⁹⁶

³⁹¹ Per-Anders Forstorp, “The Construction of Pseudo-Science;,” *VEST* 18, no. 3 (2005): 56; Pia Vuolanto and Marjo Kolehmainen, “Gendered Boundary-Work within the Finnish Skepticism Movement,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 46, no. 4 (July 1, 2021): 789–814, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243920947475>.

³⁹² Hines *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal*, 19.

³⁹³ Jane and Fleming. *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid*, 131.

³⁹⁴ Gordin, *On the Fringe: Where Science Meets Pseudoscience*, 56.

³⁹⁵ Don C. Donderi, “Science, Law, and War: Alternative Frameworks for the UFO Evidence,” ed. David M. Jacobs (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

³⁹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1988). 101.

Both ufologists and their concomitant skeptics call each other closed minded. This mirroring may be a result of these groups defining themselves against one another, insulating their perspectives as a result. This can be seen from the perspective of social epistemology: all knowledge, including the systems that produce knowledge and the people involved in designing, implementing, and using those systems, is ultimately socially situated.³⁹⁷ Brekhus introduces the “marked” and the “unmarked,” categories that exist at the center of how we perceive, construct, and communicate knowledge, and thus at the heart of the demarcation problem and the epistemic communities that have formed around it and entangled themselves with one another. The marked and the unmarked are similar to Durkheim’s sacred (important) and profane (everyday) “...in that the important analytic contrast is between the actively highlighted, set apart, and specialized (the marked) and the ordinary, generic, and taken-for-granted (the unmarked)...The contrast between the marked and the unmarked differs from Durkheim’s, however, in that it emphasizes the tremendous normative power of the unmarked.”³⁹⁸ Taking ufology as an example, we can see that they, as a group, consider UFO sightings and experiences to be worthy of study—they consider them sacred, marked. UFO skeptics and debunkers, on the other hand, consider ufologists themselves and their call for study of UFOs to be marked, and science and rationality to be unmarked, and thus normative. Applying this to the other two categories of counter-establishment research, the JFK assassination and the Missing 411 phenomenon, we can see that JFK researchers mark the case at specific points: the trajectory of the bullet, the missing brain, etc., all become sacrosanct objects of study, whereas their detractors (those who believe the findings of the Warren Report) see these artifacts and silences and mysteries as being given too much weight. The counter-establishment researchers are marked themselves as conspiracy theorists when they designate something as *marked* which the wider public considers pointedly *unmarked*. For Missing 411, this is also evident: the notion of a nonhuman connection between instances of people who go missing and/or die in the wilderness is a marking of something that has, henceforth, been unmarked. Epistemic communities form around the marking and unmarking of (A)

³⁹⁷ Fuller, *Social Epistemology*.

³⁹⁸ Wayne H. Brekhus, *Culture and Cognition* (Polity, 2015), 30

events and (B) interpretations of those events and (C) the people who do that interpreting, and “Lamont shows...that disciplinary cultures develop ‘epistemological styles’ (preferences for particular ways of understanding how to build knowledge) that strongly channel what the discipline’s members look for and therefore notice.”³⁹⁹ Some disciplinary cultures, like ufology, contain members whose epistemic approaches differ widely from one another. The subjects in this dissertation are not marked by their epistemology, necessarily; rather, they are marked by their engagement with unknowledge, rejection of official explanations for that unknowledge, and their concomitant status as subjugated knowledges. All participants are dealing in subjugated knowledge; all reject official explanations as a rule, thus their epistemic approaches must be parsed with more nuance; hence, the utility of the dimension 6 spectrum.

Deciding what is marked and what is unmarked within specific epistemic subcultures involves classification, categorization, and boundary work. Brekhus summarizes the concepts involved: “The sociology of classification focuses on how we identify and lump together similarities and split differences; how we exaggerate distinctions between categories, how we maintain symbolic boundaries to keep categories separate, maintain purity, and avoid cross-contamination between categories; how we cross boundaries...”⁴⁰⁰ Lumping and splitting are two mechanisms of classification; the former involves grouping things together, the latter, *demarcating*, or putting things into different categories. This is boundary work. Furthermore, according to Brekhus, maintaining and enforcing boundaries often involves “representations of purity and contamination,” which also “...provide moral meaning to social objects.” Brekhus analyzes this well with regard to race, a construct that has always been about keeping the white, Aryan, Anglo-Saxon race pure; categorizing all nonwhite races as *other*, *contaminated*, and *to be feared*.⁴⁰¹ Science and whiteness are not, in any way, of the same caliber; however, science does do boundary work via condemning pseudoscience as being intellectually contaminated, and, in such a way, morally repugnant. Science continues to position itself as a paragon of moral/intellectual virtue, and

³⁹⁹ Brekhus, *Culture and Cognition*, 35.

⁴⁰⁰ Brekhus, *Culture and Cognition*, 60.

⁴⁰¹ Brekhus, *Culture and Cognition*, 75.

pseudoscience, and even sometimes mere nonsense, as a perversion. Furthermore, lest we forget that whiteness and science have history in common: race science, now recognized as a pseudoscience, was lauded as progressive and scientific in its day. It is tempting to say that we know better now; scientists are, on the whole, socially progressive, and there no longer exist any areas of science that have blind spots. Yet, medicalized fatphobia remains startlingly prominent,⁴⁰² uncritical studies of weight loss⁴⁰³ and the so-called “obesity epidemic”⁴⁰⁴ continue to abound, despite the fact that we know that intentional weight loss has a failure rate of around 98%⁴⁰⁵ and that Health at Every Size is a much more efficacious approach to public health.⁴⁰⁶ Again, we see thinness lauded as a scientifically pure, and thus moral, category and fatness degraded as a contamination of immorality.

Vuolanto and Kolehmainen show that the boundary work done by the skepticism movement “maintains and produces gendered hierarchies” in a variety of ways, including by treating the university environment as neutral; when, as women and nonbinary people know, the university often functions as a instrument of oppression for non-cisgender men (that is, people with marked genders).⁴⁰⁷ Science itself is associated with masculinity: “The association marks a gendered boundary since it contributes to an understanding of femininity as external to science.”⁴⁰⁸ This is also true of many counter-establishment research areas and subjugated knowledges. For Gordin, at least part of the maleness of counter-establishment areas of research has to do with the “imitative character of counterestablishment science.

⁴⁰² Lyla E. E. Byers, “‘Warmth, Sympathy and Understanding May Outweigh the Surgeon’s Knife or the Chemist’s Drug’...Unless They’re Fat. An Analysis of Fat Patients’ Experiences with Health Care Providers” (Thesis, 2018), <http://mars.gmu.edu/handle/1920/11090>.

⁴⁰³ Jacob M. Burmeister et al., “Food Addiction in Adults Seeking Weight Loss Treatment. Implications for Psychosocial Health and Weight Loss,” *Appetite* 60 (January 1, 2013): 103–10, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2012.09.013>.

⁴⁰⁴ Christoffer Clemmensen, Michael Bang Petersen, and Thorkild I. A. Sørensen, “Will the COVID-19 Pandemic Worsen the Obesity Epidemic?,” *Nature Reviews Endocrinology* 16, no. 9 (September 2020): 469–70, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41574-020-0387-z>.

⁴⁰⁵ Aubrey Gordon, *What We Don’t Talk About When We Talk About Fat* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2020), 27.

⁴⁰⁶ M. D. Ulian et al., “Effects of Health at Every Size® Interventions on Health-Related Outcomes of People with Overweight and Obesity: A Systematic Review,” *Obesity Reviews* 19, no. 12 (2018): 1659–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/obr.12749>.

⁴⁰⁷ Pia Vuolanto and Marjo Kolehmainen, “Gendered Boundary-Work within the Finnish Skepticism Movement.”

⁴⁰⁸ Pia Vuolanto and Marjo Kolehmainen, “Gendered Boundary-Work within the Finnish Skepticism Movement,” 797

These institutions are built around an image of how science is conducted, and until quite recently mainstream science strongly marginalized women.”⁴⁰⁹ Furthermore, Vuolanto and Kolehmainen point out that, not only is a certain type of hegemonic masculinity prized by vocal skeptics—with less desirable masculinities being associated with pseudoscientific activities—and non-cisgender men being, overall, more gullible and susceptible to pseudoscientific claims like those associated with astrology, homeopathy, and alternative medicine.⁴¹⁰ In their words,

The writings of the skepticism movement draw the boundary between science and nonscience and simultaneously also generate boundaries between women and men as knowledge producers and legitimate intellectual actors. Thus, in speaking for vulnerable groups (e.g., irrational and misguided women), the movement makes those groups more vulnerable—and less able—to participate in science. This places these groups at the bottom of the hierarchy of knowledge production.⁴¹¹

By implicitly marking those whose areas of inquiry are counter-establishment, fringe, and feminized, skeptics are reinforcing the unmarked normativity and concomitant high intellectual and social status of science and masculinity. Indeed, Jane and Fleming suggest that “While it may be comforting for debunkers to conclude a priori that the kinds of suspicion exercised in conspiracy theory are, at base and in principle, misguided, we should perhaps look to the idea that there has arisen some very serious and widespread cultural concerns about public access to information and knowledge.”⁴¹² So much of what skepticism and debunking movements, and, indeed, smaller-scale reactions to misinformation and disinformation do is to put the onus on the individual for their beliefs or interests, leaving the larger structures at play uninterrogated.

In Harambam’s words, “...different people engage with conspiracy theories in different ways and for different reasons.”⁴¹³ This dissertation will illustrate this notion, particularly in regard to research around topics labeled as conspiracy theories. I will explore the idea of counter-establishment research practices, which has not been theorized elsewhere. Some work has been done on “doing your own

⁴⁰⁹ Gordin, *On the Fringe: Where Science Meets Pseudoscience*. 58.

⁴¹⁰ Vuolanto and Kolehmainen, “Gendered Boundary-Work within the Finnish Skepticism Movement,” 798-799.

⁴¹¹ Vuolanto and Kolehmainen, “Gendered Boundary-Work within the Finnish Skepticism Movement,” 808.

⁴¹² Jane and Fleming, 2014, 101.

⁴¹³ Harambam, “Against Modernist Illusions.”

research” as a conspiracy theorist maxim. Marwick and Partin outline the systematized research practices of QAnon “bakers” creating their own kind of *populist expertise*.⁴¹⁴ Birchall and Knight examine how the Internet has influenced conspiracy theories, pointing out the contrast between passionate researchers who make little money (which they position as innately “offline” and of an older generation) and prominent conspiracy theorists who stand to profit off of controversy, such as Alex Jones. They also call for nuanced research around conspiracy theories and the Internet, suggesting that the phenomenon is not monological and that context, history, and other forms of media must be considered and studied before conclusions are drawn and solutions to QAnon and other dangerous, far-right conspiracy theories are formulated.⁴¹⁵ No work has yet been done on how the maxim of *do your own research* might exist for researchers who take themselves and their research seriously.

⁴¹⁴ Marwick and Partin, “Constructing Alternative Facts.”

⁴¹⁵ Claire Birchall and Peter Knight, “Do Your Own Research: Conspiracy Theories and the Internet,” *Social Research* 89, no. 3 (June 19, 2022).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY & METHOD

I. Theoretical & Methodological Framework

Symbolic Interactionism and Grounded Theory

Symbolic interactionism and grounded theory work well together as respective theoretical and methodological frameworks. Kathy Charmaz defines symbolic interactionism as “...a dynamic theoretical perspective that views human actions as constructing self, situation, and society...[it] views interpretation and action as reciprocal processes, each affecting the other. This perspective recognizes that we act in response to how we view our situations.”⁴¹⁶ Carter and Fuller describe it as “...a micro-level theoretical framework and perspective in sociology that addresses how society is created and maintained through repeated interactions among individuals.”⁴¹⁷ In Norman K. Denzin’s words, “...Interactionists assume that human beings create the worlds of experience they live in. They do this by acting on things in terms of the meanings things have for them. These meanings come from interaction, and they are shaped by the self-reflections persons bring to their situations.”⁴¹⁸ Symbolic interactionism came out of the work of American philosopher George Herbert Mead and other early twentieth century Pragmatists. It was initially a reaction to predominant, positivist perspectives in sociology that examined society from the top down, theorizing the world in terms of grand narratives and looking at the effects of such grand narratives on the individual level.⁴¹⁹ Though the symbolic interactionist approaches remained positivist, they were

⁴¹⁶ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014). 262.

⁴¹⁷ Michael Carter and Celene Fuller, “Symbolic Interactionism,” *Sociopedia.Isa*, January 1, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1177/205684601561>. 1.

⁴¹⁸ Norman K. Denzin, ed., “The Interpretive Heritage,” in *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 22–45, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470698969.ch2>. 25.

⁴¹⁹ Carter and Fuller, “Symbolic Interactionism.” 1.

tackling the study of society differently by looking at the agenticity of individuals, examining subjects' inner worlds, experiences, interactions with their environment(s), and inner concepts of selfhood.⁴²⁰

Herbert Blumer⁴²¹ was also extraordinarily influential in establishing symbolic interactionism through his interpretation of Mead's work. His work framed individuals as agentic actors who interpret their environment(s) in a variety of ways, acting and reacting accordingly. For Blumer, social interaction, a symbolic and linguistic process, determines human conduct rather than merely being an aspect of it.⁴²² Blumer developed symbolic interactionism by emphasizing context, subjectivity, and interpretation.⁴²³ I situate myself within symbolic interactionism's interpretive, humanistic, postmodern turn, as outlined by Denzin, who asserts that symbolic interactionists "...study the micro-power relations that structure the daily performances of race, ethnicity, gender, and class in interactional situations... Interactionists don't believe in asking 'why' questions. They ask, instead, 'how' questions. How, for example, is a given strip of experience structured, lived, and given meaning?"⁴²⁴ This recalls the notion that people who study conspiracy theories from a psychological point of view ask, why do people believe conspiracy theories?, whereas my work, coming from a symbolic interactionist perspective, asks how do people who research (topics that have been described as) conspiracy theories conduct their research? Denzin suggests that interactionists have a particular interest in studying "...the marked, deviant, stigmatized, lonely, unhappy, alienated, powerful, and powerless people in everyday life."⁴²⁵ All of these words could apply to counter-establishment researchers, particularly when they are labeled as conspiracy theorists. Counter-establishment researchers can be both powerful and powerless at once; they can be perceived as being lonely and unhappy while actually finding fulfillment in their research and in their community. They make an ideal population to study using a symbolic interactionist framework.

⁴²⁰ Norman K. Denzin, *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies*. 3.

⁴²¹ Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969).

⁴²² Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. 8.

⁴²³ Carter and Fuller, "Symbolic Interactionism." 2.

⁴²⁴ Norman K. Denzin, *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies*. 24.

⁴²⁵ Norman K. Denzin, *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies*. 25.

Situated within an interpretive symbolic interactionism, my work is concerned with the creation and interpretation of the self at multiple levels. As will be shown in the following chapter, the substantive theory I have developed in the course of this project is the notion of a research self that has six distinct dimensions. The focus on the self in symbolic interactionism goes back to Mead, who defined self in terms of interaction with environment and other people. Jeon interprets Mead's conception of the self thus: "The person and the world cannot be understood in isolation because the 'self' is being continually developed through interactions with other human beings. In other words, the 'self' is a product of social interaction, developed and refined through an on-going process of participation in society."⁴²⁶ The self is not static, but neither is it wholly changeable. It can be molded according to different contextual factors, be they interpersonal or environmental.

Many symbolic interactionists have complex delineations of different selves or categories of self. I will be using Kathy Charmaz's notion of self as object and self as process:

Symbolic interactionists view the self both as a continual unfolding process and as a more stable object, the self-concept...Developing new ways of being in the world contributes to the self as process and the reconstruction of self and identity after loss or change....the self-concept consists of relatively stable, organized attributes, values, and judgements through which a person defines him or herself. If so, a self-concept has boundaries, limits, and content—including emotions and evaluations. Self-concepts are not neutral.⁴²⁷

Self-concepts can be more rigid or more permeable, but are generally stable ideas of how a person perceives themselves. For this project, I was curious about how counter-establishment researchers conducted research, but also about how they conceptualized themselves as researchers—and in relation to identifying as or being labeled as conspiracy theorists, and/or having their topic be labeled a conspiracy theory. The notion of a self-concept around research will frame the entirety of the following chapter, my results section.

In studying micro-power relations, symbolic interactionists are actively turning grand social theories and narratives on their head, preferring to explore local narratives, relationships, and

⁴²⁶ Yun-Hee Jeon, "The Application of Grounded Theory and Symbolic Interactionism," *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences* 18, no. 3 (2004): 249–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6712.2004.00287.x>, 250.

⁴²⁷ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 268.

communities—much as poststructuralists like Foucault and postmodern theorists like Lyotard did.⁴²⁸ Indeed, symbolic interactionists favor studies that are or seem to be as close as possible to approximating what research subjects or participants actually experience.⁴²⁹ Symbolic interactionist studies are often so localized that they are not very generalizable to a larger population. One of the most widely discussed shortcomings of symbolic interactionism is the fact that it might be *too* localized, and *too* focused on inner life and interpersonal interaction, thus ignoring the structural. Charmaz argues that this critique misses the point: “Symbolic interactionists do not deny the existence of social structures but argue that people construct and reproduce them.”⁴³⁰ Symbolic interactionism does not disregard structures of power; rather, it examines how they play out on the micro scale in specific contexts and circumstances. This may make symbolic interactionist studies difficult to generalize.

Denzin is known as one prominent symbolic interactionist to embrace the postmodern, interpretive, narrativistic turn, arguing that interpretive symbolic interactionists study how everyday life is animated by discursive systems (i.e., methods of representing the world) and narratives: “Systems of discourse both summarize and produce knowledge about the world (Foucault 1980: 27). These discursive systems are seldom just true or false. In the world of human affairs, truth and facts are constructed in different ways. Their meanings are embedded in competing discourses. As such they are connected to struggles over power or regimes of truth; that is, to who has the power to determine what is true and what is not true (Hall 1996c: 205).”⁴³¹ Narrative and discourse as studied in micro, interpersonal contexts, illustrate the ways in which power is played out in everyday life. Further, truth is not a straightforward thing for interpretive symbolic interactionists: Charmaz argues that the idea that the truthfulness of ideas is not as important as the reality of their effects.⁴³² This is a foundational idea for this dissertation, as I am not interrogating the truthfulness of any of the claims made by my participants.

⁴²⁸ Norman K. Denzin, *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies*. 23.

⁴²⁹ *ibid.* 25.

⁴³⁰ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 265.

⁴³¹ Norman K. Denzin, “Symbolic Interactionism,” in *A Companion to Qualitative Research*, ed. Uwe Flick, Ernst von Kardorff, and Ines Steinke (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 82–87.

⁴³² Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*. 272.

First introduced in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss,⁴³³ grounded theory is a methodological framework in which the researcher approaches their project using techniques that allow for theory to emerge from the collected data, now a core component of social scientific methods. At the time they introduced grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss were attempting to solve a specific methodological gap they observed in sociology between data gathering and data analysis.⁴³⁴ Glaser and Strauss were not only initially reacting to the reification of quantitative social science—which is still extant in the social sciences—but also to qualitative research studies being merely descriptive (rather than introducing new theories).⁴³⁵

In Kathy Charmaz’s words, “...grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves.”⁴³⁶ Similarly, Jeon defines the goals of grounded theory as being “to develop a well grounded theory that describes, explains, interprets and predicts the phenomenon of interest.”⁴³⁷ The grounded theory researcher initially approaches their research in a typical fashion: forming research questions, developing their instrument (e.g., an interview questionnaire), and collecting data.⁴³⁸ Grounded theory data processing is uniquely labor-intensive: the researcher must perform initial coding, then focused coding and categorizing (in which the researcher re-codes the initial codes), theory-building, and finally, writing.⁴³⁹ Grounded theory work is iterative at its core, and theory building is itself predicated on constant and consistent memo-writing as a method for recalibrating and reconsidering the data, as well as facilitating researcher

⁴³³ Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).

⁴³⁴ Kathy Charmaz, Robert Thornberg, and Elaine Keane, “Evaluating Grounded Theory and Social Justice Inquiry,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Yvonna S. Lincoln and Norman K. Denzin, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2018), 411–43.

⁴³⁵ Charmaz, Thornberg, and Keane, “Evaluating Grounded Theory and Social Justice Inquiry.”

⁴³⁶ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 1.

⁴³⁷ Yun-Hee Jeon, “The Application of Grounded Theory and Symbolic Interactionism.”

⁴³⁸ Although grounded theory and symbolic interactionist studies do not necessarily always involve human subjects, my study does involve human subjects, so I will be obliquely referring to steps taken in a human subjects research design.

⁴³⁹ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 18.

reflexivity. Grounded theorists are involved in a multi-step process that includes several ongoing activities, including concurrent data collection and analysis, construction of codes from the data (rather than having a prescribed set of codes), conducting the “constant comparison” (making comparisons at every stage of the research process), theory development at every step, memo writing at every step, theoretical sampling (to develop a theory, not reflect a population comprehensively), and conducting the literature review *after* initial analysis and initial theorizing takes place.⁴⁴⁰

Grounded theory requires the researcher to engage in continuous iterative processes, including perpetually moving between collecting data, coding, and writing memos.⁴⁴¹ I am including two specific diagrams that illustrate the process of conducting grounded theory studies:

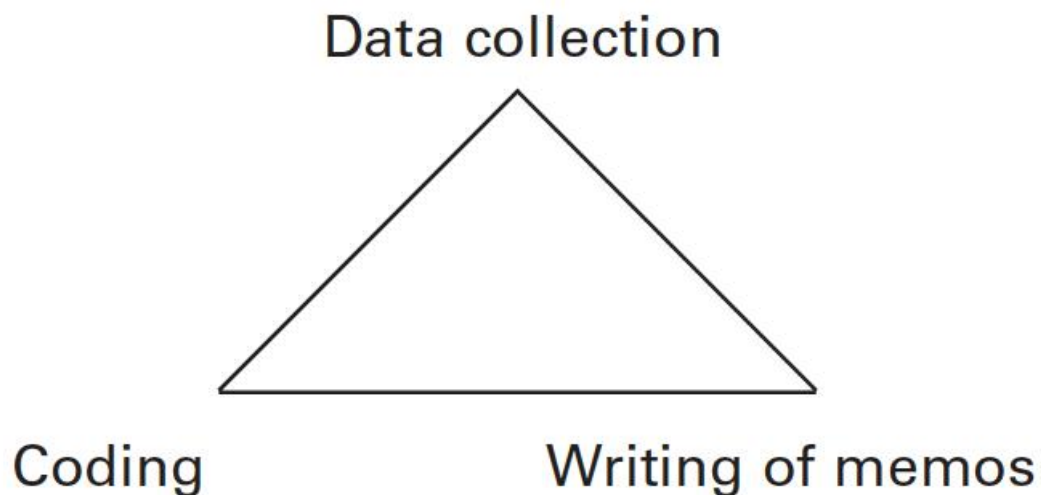


Figure 3.1: “Grounded theory as a triadic and circular process,”⁴⁴²

This initial diagram illustrates the simultaneity of these three activities. Writing memos is a constant part of doing a grounded theory study—I wrote memos as I was writing initial research questions, as I was recruiting and interviewing, as I was coding my data, and again as I recoded it until theoretical categories

⁴⁴⁰ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*. 7 - 8.

⁴⁴¹ Bruno Hildenbrand, “Anselm Strauss,” in *A Companion to Qualitative Research*, ed. Uwe Flick, Ernst von Kardorff, and Ines Steinke (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 17–23.

⁴⁴² Bruno Hildenbrand, “Anselm Strauss,” 18.

emerged. Kathy Charmaz’s diagram of the activities of the grounded theorist is similarly meant to show the iterative patterns involved in doing grounded theory research, but in a more detailed and systematic way:

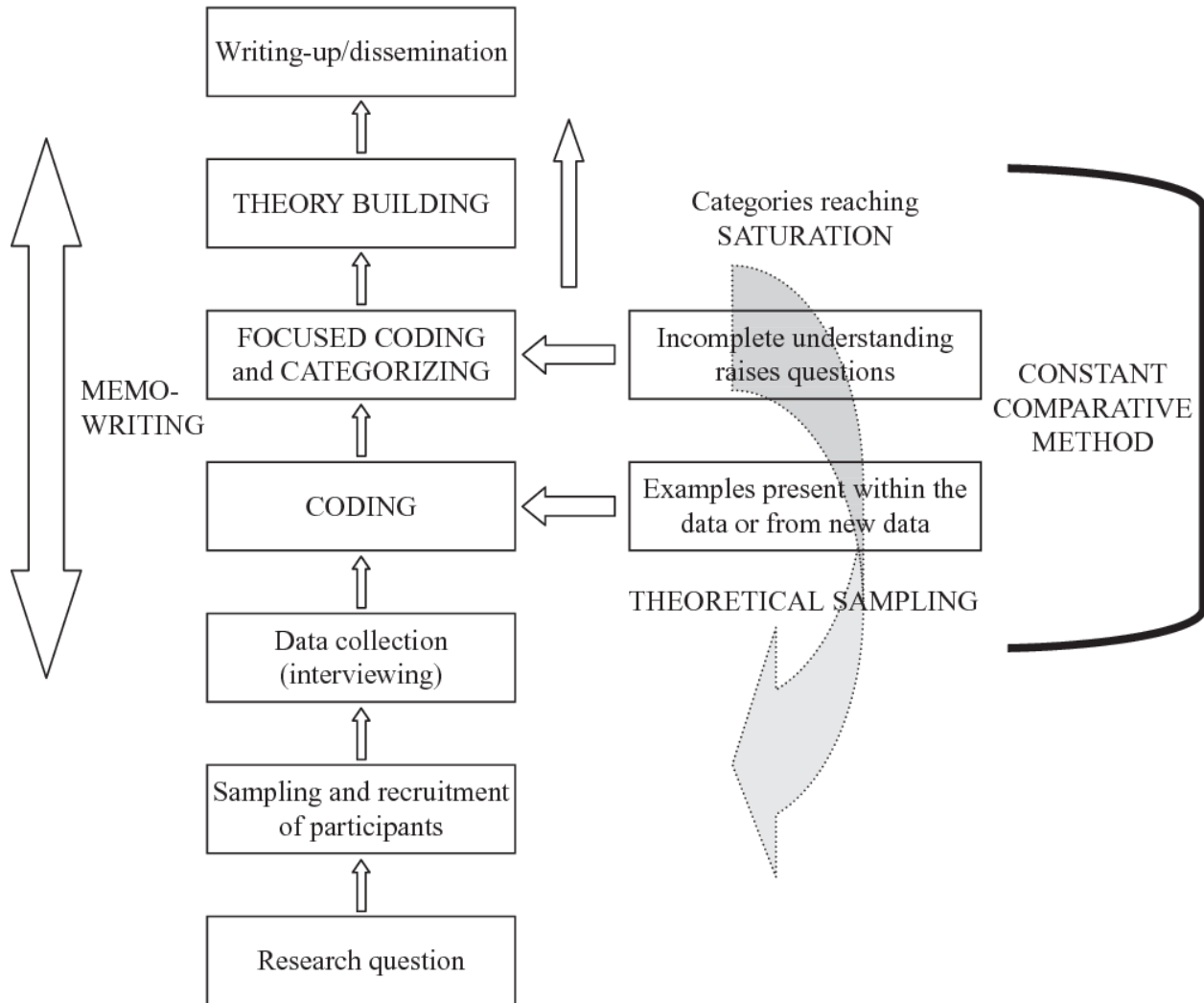


Figure 3.2: Kathy Charmaz’s diagram outlining the process of conducting a grounded theory study.⁴⁴³

This diagram shows, in more detail, the research steps involved in building a grounded theory from a constructivist point of view. I followed this diagram while carrying out my study, which will be outlined in more detail below. *Constructivist* grounded theory “...acknowledges the standpoints and starting points of the researcher, the influence of the research situation, and controversies about the representation of

⁴⁴³ Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

research participants, and it emphasizes engaging in reflexivity.”⁴⁴⁴ Further, constructivist grounded theory is explicitly interpretivist in its epistemological orientation.⁴⁴⁵ This dissertation is a constructivist grounded theory study.

Research can never be neutral or objective, as it always involves interpretation on the part of the researcher and is necessarily always political. Reflexivity can help the researcher stay grounded in their research. For Charmaz, “The researcher’s scrutiny of the research experience, decisions, and interpretations in ways that bring him or her into the process. Reflexivity includes examining how the researcher’s interests, positions, and assumptions influenced his or her inquiry. A reflexive stance informs how the researcher conducts his or her research, relates to the research participants, and represents them in written reports.”⁴⁴⁶ I will return to the practice of reflexivity later in this section, but I will mention here that I wrote memos throughout the research process as a reflexive practice; constantly asking myself where in relation to my participants I could place myself. In one circumstance, which I will detail below, a conversation with a potential interviewee resulted in my changing the terminology I was using in recruitment documents and in my writing.

Grounded theory work involves both inductive and abductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning involves analyzing a range of objects and locating patterns within them that form conceptual categories.⁴⁴⁷ Induction is the first step towards abductive logic. Abductive logic is “...a creative form of reasoning that entails constructing a theoretical explanation of puzzling findings and developing and checking the tentative theoretical categories constituting this explanation.”⁴⁴⁸ Charmaz has also characterized abductive logic as an “imaginative leap” taken by the researcher,⁴⁴⁹ allowing for more creative and abstract reasoning than more common forms of reasoning, like deductive (the supremacy of which grounded theory was a reaction against).

⁴⁴⁴ Charmaz, Thornberg, and Keane, “Evaluating Grounded Theory and Social Justice Inquiry.” 416.

⁴⁴⁵ Charmaz, Thornberg, and Keane, “Evaluating Grounded Theory and Social Justice Inquiry.” 417.

⁴⁴⁶ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 355.

⁴⁴⁷ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 343.

⁴⁴⁸ Charmaz, Thornberg, and Keane, “Evaluating Grounded Theory and Social Justice Inquiry,” 412.

⁴⁴⁹ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 340.

The ultimate goal of a grounded theory study is to develop substantive or formal theory.

Substantive theory explains a specific problem in a particular area of study, like libraries and archives or the relationships between members of a community. Formal theory is a “theoretical rendering of a generic issue or process that cuts across several substantive areas of study.”⁴⁵⁰ Formal theories are more abstract, cross-cutting, and generalizable when compared to substantive theories. For a variety of reasons that will be touched upon in this chapter, this dissertation presents a *substantive* theory of the research selves of counter-establishment researchers. Some criticism of grounded theory work addresses the fact that most of it presents substantive theory. Yet, substantive theory remains valuable, particularly within a symbolic interactionist framework. It is crucial that grounded theorists decide which level of theory they will develop in their study, as the activities involved in developing substantive and formal theory are distinct.⁴⁵¹ This study was designed from the beginning to explore substantive rather than formal theory.

Grounded theory in fact grew out of symbolic interactionism,⁴⁵² and grounded theory methods rooted in symbolic interactionist theory provide deep insight into specific conceptions of identity and self. Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory in fact places the method back in touch with its symbolic interactionist roots.⁴⁵³ The “constructivist” in constructivist grounded theory is meant “...to acknowledge subjectivity and the researcher’s involvement in the construction and interpretation of data...”⁴⁵⁴ recognizing that the researcher influences the data just as much, if not more, than the participants from whom data is derived. Even from the beginning of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss emphasized the importance of comparative analysis as a method of creating “theory as process; i.e. theory as an ever-developing entity, not as a perfect product.”⁴⁵⁵ In such a way, I do not view the substantive theory of the counter-establishment research self I am developing in this dissertation as a final, finished product; I intend to continue developing it, perhaps in the next stage, as a formal theory.

⁴⁵⁰ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 343.

⁴⁵¹ Yun-Hee Jeon, “The Application of Grounded Theory and Symbolic Interactionism.”

⁴⁵² Bruno Hildenbrand, “Anselm Strauss.”

⁴⁵³ Charmaz, Thornberg, and Keane, “Evaluating Grounded Theory and Social Justice Inquiry.” 416.

⁴⁵⁴ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 14.

⁴⁵⁵ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, 32.

Feminist Methodology and Epistemic Empathy

The grounded theory approach to this study is informed by feminist methodology. Self-reporting is a limitation of the study design, but—drawing on feminist standpoint theory—throughout the study, I have made it a priority to center the voices of interviewees. This is of particular importance with this population, as they have been epistemically excluded from mainstream knowledge production. Postmodern feminist epistemology parallels the epistemological underpinnings of grounded theory to some degree: both operate from the social constructivist assumption that many different truths and realities exist in the world.⁴⁵⁶ Centering participants in this study also works as a symbolic interactionist praxis: “...symbolic interactionists have much in common with phenomenologists, in their emphasis on the individual’s lived experience, the inner world of human behaviour, the notion of meaning perceived by the participant, and understanding a situation from the participant’s point of view.”⁴⁵⁷ Feminist standpoint theory and its underlying epistemolog(ies) can be considered a methodological orientation toward research and the world as a whole, rather than an imperative to study the oppression of women specifically.⁴⁵⁸ Further, “...knowledge is shaped by the social context of the knower; the perspective of groups marginalized by race, class, or gender is most complete because it reflects the experience of the disadvantaged within the dominant culture.”⁴⁵⁹ While counter-establishment researchers are *not* an oppressed group—indeed by some measures they are quite powerful⁴⁶⁰—they certainly do deal in subjugated knowledge(s)⁴⁶¹ and are also often pushed to the margins by mainstream epistemic shame and

⁴⁵⁶ Judith Wuest, “Feminist Grounded Theory: An Exploration of the Congruency and Tensions between Two Traditions in Knowledge Discovery,” *Qualitative Health Research* 5, no. 1 (February 1, 1995): 125–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/104973239500500109>, 125.

⁴⁵⁷ Yun-Hee Jeon, “The Application of Grounded Theory and Symbolic Interactionism,” 250.

⁴⁵⁸ Susan Hekman, “Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited,” *Signs* 22, no. 2 (1997): 341–65, 342.

⁴⁵⁹ Wuest, “Feminist Grounded Theory,” 126.

⁴⁶⁰ Marwick and Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online,” 17.

⁴⁶¹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 82.

dismissal.⁴⁶² In such a way, reflecting counter-establishment researchers' epistemic experiences may shed some light on how they exist within dominant epistemic cultures. Furthermore, centering the voices of *users* of information institutions is also in line with feminist methodological practice. Wuest ultimately suggests that the way to avoid any significant influences of a feminist methodological standpoint on the iterative theory-building practice of grounded theory is to ensure that the researcher practices reflexivity and at every stage in the process.⁴⁶³

In feminist qualitative research, indeed qualitative research in general, reflexivity is extremely important: "The researcher is expected to acknowledge her situated perspective, to reflect on and share how her life experiences might have influenced her choice of topics and questions."⁴⁶⁴ For this reason, I will insert myself more readily into this section of the dissertation as a practice in reflexivity and positionality, reflecting on my own position as a feminist scholar. As a researcher, my perspective is determined by my intersecting identities: I am a white, American, able-bodied, cisgender lesbian from a middle-class background. These and other intersecting identities influence the filter through which I see the world and conduct research. Some of my more outwardly visible identities also determine how my interviewees perceive and respond to me. Feminist research is concerned with power; methodologically, with the power differential between interviewer and interviewee. The interviewer-interviewee relationship can be extractive when not thought about critically; feminist researchers often replace the term "subject" with "collaborator" or in my case, "participant," in order to avoid some of these power imbalances. The interviewer's status as an academic is also important to highlight here: "Being committed to seeing things from the respondents' position is a necessary aspect of feminist research, but it is also important to recognize our privileged position within our relationship with respondents...Often credentials and our status within the academy place us in a privileged position."⁴⁶⁵ In some of my interviews, these power

⁴⁶² Harambam and Aupers, "Contesting Epistemic Authority."

⁴⁶³ Wuest, "Feminist Grounded Theory," 135.

⁴⁶⁴ Maureen C. McHugh, "Feminist Qualitative Research: Toward Transformation of Science and Society," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, by Maureen C. McHugh, ed. Patricia Leavy (Oxford University Press, 2014), 136–64, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199811755.013.014>, 13.

⁴⁶⁵ McHugh, "Feminist Qualitative Research," 15.

dynamics were certainly present, but in others, these typical power dynamics became muddled. First, a few of my interviewees had PhDs and were thus higher in the academic hierarchy than I currently am, as a doctoral candidate. Yet, these people had also been systematically excluded from working and researching within the academy, of which I am still a part. They had a greater degree of degree-conferred power, whereas I had a greater degree of institutional power. Further, as a young, white woman interviewing older, white (or white passing) men about their expertise, I was sometimes subject to a kind of paternalistic attitude from my interviewees. They would occasionally offer me advice on my studies or on life in general. This was an advantage in some circumstances, because I believe my presence had a disarming effect for some of my interviewees. No matter their gender, education level, or research style, I tried to maintain an open-minded, gentle, and curious disposition.

Some feminist researchers write a short *intellectual autobiography*⁴⁶⁶ in which they discuss how they came to their research topic and methodological orientation. For myself, I have always been interested in the inexplicable and conspiratorial, having had an inexplicable, seemingly paranormal experience myself as a teenager. I did not become academically interested in the topic until the end of my first year as a PhD student, when I wrote a paper on the true MK Ultra conspiracy and the more outlandish conspiracy theories it spawned in the decades since the program was active. In the course of writing that paper, I became more interested in what the fields of conspiracy theory scholarship and information studies had to say to each other, since so many questions around conspiracy theory are questions of epistemology, evidence, and knowledge production. I became curious about whether or not people were researching conspiracy theories in physical repositories.

I published an article about online discussions of the 2017 release of JFK assassination documents,⁴⁶⁷ as well as one about how information workers at state-sponsored information institutions

⁴⁶⁶ Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, *Breaking out Again: Feminist Ontology and Epistemology*, 2nd ed (London: New York : Routledge, 1993).

⁴⁶⁷ Eadon, “‘Useful Information Turned into Something Useless’: Archival Silences, Imagined Records, and Suspicion of Mediated Information in the JFK Assassination Collection.”

assisted people who came in looking for information on strange or conspiratorial topics.⁴⁶⁸ It was through this work that I developed the concept of *epistemic empathy* in partnership with my interviewees. Epistemic empathy is a recent concept that has been explored in fields relating to social and virtue epistemology, particularly Education.⁴⁶⁹ It refers to attempting to understand another person's point of view as it relates to their cognitive worldview, information seeking, and/or knowledge production practices and perceptions.⁴⁷⁰ Several of the reference archivists I spoke with described this practice, in which they attempted to understand where a mistrustful researcher was coming from, emphasizing that they would make more of an effort to find what mistrustful interviewees were looking for in order to bridge the gap and foster a trusting relationship. I believe this practice is also necessary for academics who interview people who either identify as conspiracy theorists or have been accused of being conspiracy theorists. This entails going above and beyond in establishing a trusting relationship between oneself and one's study participants, attempting to understand their perspectives on knowledge production and research in a nonjudgmental way. Working with people who research topics that have been systematically excluded from the academy entails building trust with them.

As I was conducting this initial research project, I recognized that I needed to speak directly with the researchers themselves to truly understand how research was being done around topics that had been labeled conspiracy theories. Starting from a place of fostering my own epistemic empathy, I realized that I would need to recruit only people with whom I generally *could* empathize epistemically. This meant choosing specific topics that I felt I could understand the reasoning behind, and resulted in my choosing the JFK assassination, ufology, and the Missing 411 phenomenon. In order to have what I felt to be an adequate amount of epistemic empathy with my participants, I felt the topics they would specialize in had to be less harmful than, say, QAnon.

⁴⁶⁸ Eadon, "(Not) Part of the System: Resolving Epistemic Disconnect Through Archival Reference."

⁴⁶⁹ Kai Horsthemke, "Epistemic Empathy in Childrearing and Education," *Ethics and Education* 10, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 61–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2014.998025>.

⁴⁷⁰ Michael Slote, *Education and Human Values: Reconciling Talent with an Ethics of Care* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

Through the course of my research, I found myself asking: is it possible to conduct feminist research while doing work that is not explicitly on women or necessarily about gender? For McHugh, “Feminist research is not research *about* women, but research *for* women; it is knowledge to be used in the transformation of sexist society.”⁴⁷¹ Even more generally, Devault states that, “I think of feminist methods as distinctive approaches to subverting the established procedures of disciplinary practice tied to the agendas of the powerful.”⁴⁷² As I was recruiting for this dissertation, I realized that it was challenging to recruit women. But as a feminist researcher, it felt necessary to include the perspective of women in my research project. Without it, the imperative of doing research *for* women would not be possible. Yet, I still find myself asking: Am I a feminist researcher? Or am I a researcher who is also a feminist? Hawkesworth suggests that feminist research should always be “interrogating accepted beliefs, challenging shared assumptions and reframing research questions.”⁴⁷³ This dissertation is certainly interrogating the accepted belief that conspiracy theorists are crazy, stupid, or both; upending the idea that the best way to deal with them is not to engage and to dismiss them.

Studying conspiracy theory

As discussed in the literature review, the way we talk about conspiracy theory and research has an undeniable effect on how people who research conspiracy theories do so. Bratich’s notion of *conspiracy panics*, mentioned in the previous chapter, outlines the effects of how we talk about conspiracy theory. Reacting to the psychological approach, which asks *why do people believe in conspiracy theories*, Bratich suggests that:

We do not...need to trace the rise in popularity of *beliefs* in conspiracy but, instead, to map a heightened intensity in the *panics* over the beliefs. Certainly we might say that the narratives have been on the rise, with an increased visibility and circulation via new technologies and popular culture representations...But, more importantly, the recent resurgence of conspiracy theories can

⁴⁷¹ McHugh, “Feminist Qualitative Research: Toward Transformation of Science and Society.”

⁴⁷² Marjorie L. Devault, “Talking and Listening from Women’s Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis,” *Social Problems* 37, no. 1 (February 1, 1990): 96–116, <https://doi.org/10.2307/800797>.

⁴⁷³ Mary E. Hawkesworth, *Feminist Inquiry: From Political Conviction to Methodological Innovation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

be attributed to the *crisis* surrounding them. In this crisis, we see an increasing fervor surrounding issues of dissent, reason, governance, activism, populism, globalization, new technologies, consent, and truth converging on the problem of conspiracy theories... Whether by liberal experts, professional journalists, or Left activists, problematizations of conspiracy theories help constitute contemporary political rationality, enabling liberal governing at a distance to continue to take place through thought at work upon itself.⁴⁷⁴

This quotation brings up a lot for people studying conspiracy theories and adjacent topics in 2022. Does the notion of conspiracy panics still apply to doing work on conspiracy theory in the age of QAnon? How should social scientists engage with, write about, and disseminate their research about conspiracy theories and those who research and believe in them? QAnon's widespread cultural effects—including, but certainly not limited to, the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol—has resulted in, arguably, an *even more pronounced* conspiracy panic. The dangerous effects of QAnon are obvious and undeniable—but what are the effects of the conspiracy panic surrounding it?

The effects of the conspiracy panics like the one around QAnon can be felt acutely when doing research on conspiracy theories in the early 2020s. People who hear me speak often ask my opinion on QAnon, even though it is not the conspiracy-related topic I write about or specialize in. Most people who hear what my research is about say that it is “more relevant now than ever before.” Even potential interview participants were put off by early drafts of my recruitment materials that used the term “conspiracist” because at the time, I thought it was a less harmful term than “conspiracy theorist.” I find myself feeling worried, at times, that my stance on refusing to shame or dismiss conspiracy theories by virtue of their status as such might paint me, to some people, as an apologist for extremely harmful, white supremacist, far-right conspiracy theories. Following Weber, Harambam⁴⁷⁵ suggests that sociologists should not fulfill the role of deciding what is morally acceptable and what isn't, but I disagree. Academics must come out strongly against white supremacy, racism, sexism, transphobia, etc., *because* it is so normative in American society. However, assuming that every single conspiracy theory is extremist and

⁴⁷⁴ Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, 160-161.

⁴⁷⁵ Grodzicka, Elżbieta Drażkiewicz, and Jaron Harambam. “What Should Academics Do about Conspiracy Theories? Moving beyond Debunking to Better Deal with Conspiratorial Movements, Misinformation and Post-Truth.” *Journal for Cultural Research* 0, no. 0 (March 5, 2021): 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2021.1886420>.

racist just because many of them are is also not productive. My refusal to come out strongly against all conspiracy theories does not make me *more accepting* of the likes of QAnon. Maintaining my normative orientation that not all conspiracy theories are evil by virtue of being conspiracy theories does not make me an apologist for those conspiracy theories that *are* white supremacist in nature, because I am not talking about those theories.

One notable consequence of widespread conspiracy panic has to do with pushing people who research counter-establishment subjects farther away from mainstream knowledge production. Academics and journalists using the term “conspiracy theorist” pejoratively and/or developing or weaponizing a pathology of conspiracy theory, does not make it inviting for researchers to engage with them. In

Harambam’s words:

...discarding conspiracy theories as illusory, paranoid and dangerous does not help in any way to *understand* the huge appeal they have for many people living today...If we are to grasp what they are about and why so many people nowadays engage with these alternative forms of knowledge, then we need to go further than merely dismissing these ideas as pathological. Then we should explore the reasons people have to follow conspiracy theories *without* the need to disqualify or compare them to certain moral or epistemological standards.⁴⁷⁶

Academics who engage in human subjects research with people who have or could be labeled conspiracy theorists must do so using epistemic empathy, intuition, and intimacy.⁴⁷⁷ Doing so can build a bridge between counter-establishment researchers and mainstream researchers (who also may consider themselves counter-establishment in the sense that they oppose establishment or institutional perspectives), so that they might co-produce knowledge together. The similarities between disruptive social science work and counter-establishment research can also help foster knowledge co-creation: returning to a quote from Devault about feminist research, “I think of feminist methods as distinctive approaches to subverting the established procedures of disciplinary practice tied to the agendas of the powerful.”⁴⁷⁸ Many counter-establishment researchers, especially those researching government conspiracies like the alleged one around the death of JFK, share the same motivation. Ultimately, as

⁴⁷⁶ Harambam, “‘The Truth Is Out There’: Conspiracy Culture in an Age of Epistemic Instability,” 11.

⁴⁷⁷ Coleman, “A Method of Intuition.”

⁴⁷⁸ Devault, “Talking and Listening from Women’s Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis.”

critical academic social scientists, we have more in common with counter-establishment researchers than we may initially realize—or indeed, be comfortable with.

Feminist postmodernism has a lot to say to the study of conspiracy theory, as well, including parallel perspectives on science and objectivity. Science has created and claimed the right to describe reality, which has resulted in women being unable to, in some circumstances, articulate their own experiences in a way that works in tandem with science. For postmodern feminists, language is extremely important as a way to think through how women are able to frame and articulate their own experiences.⁴⁷⁹

Interpretive symbolic interactionism takes a similar view:

Interpretive interactionists are skeptical of those who call themselves scientists (Couch 1987). They believe that science too often gets confused with ideology and the powers of the state (Foucault 1980). They think that the findings of science are often used to manipulate people in the name of some societal good or goal which is always defined in political terms. They are fearful of those who would build a totalizing science of the social.⁴⁸⁰

Science, and especially a science of the social, is too confident in its own ability to approximate reality and/ or the truth to be inherently trustworthy. Recognition of one's own shortcomings as a researcher is imperative, and reflecting on how to overcome those shortcomings is also necessary.

Counter-establishment researchers are similarly chained to the term “conspiracy theorist,” a label whose discursive power is undeniable. McHugh summarizes feminist postmodernism:

From a postmodern perspective, all knowledge involves a position or perspective that results in partial or situated knowledge. Furthermore, postmodern positions reject claims of grand theories and discoveries of some truth that exists ‘out there.’ Knowledge is viewed as co-created or constructed in social interactions. Developing a theory of human behavior based on the study of a limited sample of people is viewed as inappropriate and universalizing. Some have exposed the issue of scientific objectivity as an elitist effort to exclude others from making meaning, a system by which all who are not trained to participate are devalued and objectified...⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁹ Maureen C. McHugh, “Feminist Qualitative Research: Toward Transformation of Science and Society,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, by Maureen C. McHugh, ed. Patricia Leavy (Oxford University Press, 2014), 136–64, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199811755.013.014>. 18.

⁴⁸⁰ Norman K. Denzin, *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470698969.ch2>. 24.

⁴⁸¹ McHugh, “Feminist Qualitative Research,” 18.

All knowledge, including scientific and academic knowledge, is necessarily situated and thus partial. Co-creating knowledge with communities one is researching, which this dissertation aims to do, approximates knowledge from multiple points of view and multiple vectors of social interaction. Yet, because of the substantive nature of the grounded theory produced, it does not purport to be widely generalizable. Co-creation with participants is particularly important as a goal when dealing with communities that create and sustain subjugated knowledges, such as counter-establishment researchers.

II. Method and Study Design

Research Questions

As is typical for grounded theory studies, my research questions changed over the course of my research. The study was initially designed around the following central research question: how do conspiracists conduct research? Or: what are the information seeking practices of conspiracists? I have since amended the language around this central research question so that it now reads: How do counter-establishment researchers conduct research? What are the information practices of counter-establishment researchers?

This change in terminology can be traced to a conversation I had with one of my interviewees. My initial recruitment materials included the term “conspiracist researcher” in them. Before interviewing each participant, I sent them consent documents by email. Bill S. was the second person I interviewed, and he responded to my email by expressing some doubt about my framing and requesting to talk on the phone. Over the phone, Bill stated that he was uncomfortable with the term “conspiracist researcher” or “conspiracy research,” preferring to think of himself as an investigative journalist. This was initially upsetting to me, as I had framed my research entirely around this concept, and I was worried that this

would completely dismantle my argument and framing. At the same time, I was reminded of my first interviewee (Steve's) thoughts on researcher reflexivity (a term he did not explicitly use, but that he outlined very well): if a researcher holds on too tightly to one's initial framing or thesis, then that is not good research (see section on reflexivity in chapter 4 for a direct quotation). Further, grounded theory stipulates that we allow theory to emerge from the data, so why the need to label something immediately and stick with that label throughout the research process? At this point, I let go of the term "conspiracy/conspiracist researcher" without immediately coming up with a new term (preferring to label the term later in the process). However, I felt it was still necessary to include the term "conspiracy theory" in the consent document, to signpost that I would be engaging with that literature. Thus, I referred to the topics as "topics that have been labeled as 'conspiracy theories'" in order to clearly mark that I was interested in grouping them together as such, without labeling them that way myself. Initially I was worried that some of the interviewees would not be comfortable with my using the term "conspiracy theory" at all, but those who were willing to speak with me did not take issue with the revised language in the consent document. All of my interviewees collaborated with me on the knowledge presented in this dissertation; however, Steve and especially Bill were instrumental in my early reflexivity and resulting reframing of the topic. I have no doubt Bill's openness and Steve's reflexivity allowed me to recruit and speak to people I otherwise would not have been able to.

My research questions evolved over the course of interviewing, coding, and writing. I designed the study around the following research questions, which I will include here using the original language:

1. How do conspiracist researchers decide that they want to conduct research on a topic?
 - 1.1. What kinds of subjects do conspiracist researchers research?
 - 1.1.1. What kinds of subjects do they find most enjoyable to research?
 - 1.1.2. Most challenging?
 - 1.1.3. What is the purpose of their research?
 - 1.1.4. What resources do they trust the most and why do they trust these resources?
2. What is the experience of conspiracist researchers when conducting research in person at a library or archives, and/or online?
 - 2.1. What is their experience of being helped by reference personnel?
 - 2.2. How do they feel about reference personnel in general? About specific individuals?
 - 2.3. What is their attitude towards conducting research online versus in person?

3. In what ways is conspiracist information seeking epistemically distinct from other kinds of information seeking?
4. How, if at all, do the emotions felt in the course of doing research contribute to how much conspiracist researchers trust specific resources, platforms, institutions, and reference personnel?
 - 4.1. How, if at all, do the affective aspects of doing research contribute to *where* conspiracists conduct research (online, in person; at archives, in libraries)?
 - 4.2. How do conspiratorially minded researchers think of themselves as information seekers? E.g., what is their self-described identity, as it relates to information seeking?

I also originally designed this study to be a convergent parallel mixed methods study, which would have included interviews with reference personnel, as well as a survey of researchers and reference personnel. This proved too complex for a dissertation-level study, especially one with an in-depth qualitative component.

In November of 2020, as I was just starting to interview, and before I had changed my terminology, I revised these questions further. This reflects where my research was going at this time, and how my priorities were changing as the research itself was unfolding:

1. How do individuals who research three specific conspiracy theory–related topics [the JFK assassination, the Roswell Incident, and the Missing 411 phenomenon] conduct their research?
 - 1.1. Where do they go to seek information?
 - 1.2. What methods do they use?
 - 1.3. What are their affective experiences around research?
 - 1.4. What informational resources do they trust?
 - 1.4.1. Why do they trust these resources?
2. How do conspiratorially minded researchers think of themselves as information seekers? E.g., what is their self-described identity, as it relates to information seeking?
3. How do they feel about the term “conspiracy theorist”?

There were other iterations of research questions that continued throughout the research process. As of August 2022, my research questions are thus:

1. How do individuals who research three specific counter-establishment topics [the JFK assassination, the Roswell Incident, and the Missing 411 phenomenon] conduct their research?
2. What are their *dimensions of the research self (RS)*?
 - 2.1. At what life stage did their interest in the topic originate? (Dimension 1)
 - 2.2. What are their motivations for doing this research? (Dimension 2)
 - 2.3. What methods do they use? Where do they go to do research? (Dimension 3)
 - 2.4. What are their practices and conceptualizations around research? What is the role of emotion? What is the role of reflexivity? (Dimension 4)
 - 2.5. How do they think of themselves as information seekers? E.g., what is their self-described identity, as it relates to information seeking? (Dimension 5)
 - 2.6. What kind of epistemology do they employ? (Dimension 6)⁴⁸²

⁴⁸² See figures 6 and 7 in Appendix for visualizations

3. How does the *conspiracy theory/ist* label affect these counter-establishment researchers?
 - 3.1. How does it shape their research?
 - 3.2. How does it affect their RS?

Study Design

I chose intensive interviewing as my method for a variety of reasons. Intensive interviewing works well as a grounded theory method because it produces rich, qualitative data that can be coded and re-coded to build theory. Intensive interviewing as a grounded theory technique allows the researcher to gather in-depth data on a topic, from the perspective of a finite number of individuals. Charmaz describes interviewing as an “...emergent technique that compiles flexibility and control; opens interactional space for ideas and issues to arise; allows possibilities for immediate follow-up on those ideas and issues; and results from interviewers and interview participants’ co-construction of the interview conversation.”⁴⁸³ Interviews are a suitable data collection technique for this project, as they are “..appropriate when the purpose of the researcher is to gain individual views, beliefs and feelings about a subject, when questions are too complex to be asked in a straightforward way and more depth is required from the answers.”⁴⁸⁴ Individual researchers’ research techniques, experiences, and identities around research are deeply nuanced and thus warrant descriptions of in-depth experience. In grounded theory interviews, the research participant does most of the talking⁴⁸⁵ and sets the pace of the interview questions.⁴⁸⁶ Qualitative interviewing informed by grounded theory necessitates constant researcher reflexivity, facilitated by memo-writing and journaling.⁴⁸⁷ This allows the researcher to also negotiate and be aware of the power dynamics inherent in the activity of interviewing, as well as those that come with gender, professional status, race, and age.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸³ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 59.

⁴⁸⁴ Alison Jane Pickard, *Research Methods in Information*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2013), 205.

⁴⁸⁵ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 58.

⁴⁸⁶ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 63.

⁴⁸⁷ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 64.

⁴⁸⁸ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 74.

Intensive interviewing is likewise well suited to feminist research. Shulamit Reinharz argues that unstructured interviews in particular are suitable to feminist research because they create ideal circumstances for “discovery and description.”⁴⁸⁹ Furthermore, Reinharz outlines that, for some feminist thinkers, “...open-ended interviewing is particularly suited to female researchers.” She goes on, stating, “Interviewing is also consistent with many women’s interest in avoiding control over others and developing a sense of connectedness with people.”⁴⁹⁰ While this could be considered essentialist out of context, I feel that this reflects my experience quite well—I feel comfortable as an interviewer with asking deep questions and listening to responses actively. I reflect on this frequently, and on the dynamic that this created with my participants: How many were willing to speak with me because I am a young, white, femme cisgender woman? And how much did the ways I interviewed and listened to them confirm their (assumed) prejudices? I also reflected on the notion that some of my interviewees may have been *less* open with me than if I had been a male interviewer. One participant asked me my age (wondering if I had memories of the 9/11 attacks), but with a caveat: “...now, I don’t want to ask your age...” This comment made me wonder if the same cautious tone would have been taken with a young male interviewer, or if it might have been something along the lines of “how old are you, son?” I did not notice this subtle dynamic quite as much with the younger men I interviewed, perhaps due to being closer in age. All of my participants were highly respectful of me and of my work, but reflexive practice led me to ask some of these (admittedly somewhat trivial) questions.

I interviewed thirteen participants over Zoom in two sessions. Sessions ranged between twenty minutes and an hour and a half. McHugh expresses that much feminist research explores experiences that are often under-explored, and that “...when the goal of the research is in-depth understanding, a smaller sample is used since the interviewer is interested in the process and meanings and not in the generalization of the findings.”⁴⁹¹ Thus I did not try to interview a large number of people, preferring to

⁴⁸⁹ Shulamit Reinharz, “Feminist Interview Methods,” in *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 18–45, 18.

⁴⁹⁰ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 20.

⁴⁹¹ McHugh, “Feminist Qualitative Research.”

have deeper conversations with fewer interviewees, coding in depth, as well. Reinharz indicates that a multi-interview structure is in fact a hallmark of much feminist research, speculating that this may be due to its fostering of distinctly strong interviewer-interviewee relationships.⁴⁹²

I collected all of my interview data over Zoom—a necessity during the pandemic era. Trier-Bieniek argues that “...the use of a feminist approach to research methodology can be used as a guide for making telephone interviews participant centered, and I contend that telephone interviews can be beneficial in studies of sensitive subjects or studies that require in-depth interviews.”⁴⁹³ Because interviewees are often in a private space in their home, they may be more comfortable providing more honest answers. Furthermore, Zoom interviews allowed me to not only interview people who lived across the country and around the world, but it may have also yielded richer data in concert with the feminist methodology with which my work is framed.

Zoom interviews are convenient and comfortable for interviewees—even more important for those who live with disabilities, as one of my interviewees did. Participants being in their own home can also foster intimacy between interviewer and interviewee, yielding richer data. Reinharz summarized the advances of Ann Oakley’s sociology. Oakley “...advocated a new model of feminist interviewing that strove for intimacy and included self-disclosure and ‘believing the interviewee.’ Guiding this new model was a proposed feminist ethic of commitment and egalitarianism in contrast with the scientific ethic of detachment and role differentiation between researcher and subject.”⁴⁹⁴ Believing the interviewee *as a rule* fosters intimacy and trust between interviewer and interviewee. It may make interviewees more likely to disclose “the truth” if they feel they are being trusted by the interviewer.⁴⁹⁵ Thus, I did not question anything my interviewees told me, choosing to take everything they had to say at face value. I

⁴⁹² Reinharz, “Feminist Interview Methods,” 36.

⁴⁹³ Adrienne Trier-Bieniek, “Framing the Telephone Interview as a Participant-Centered Tool for Qualitative Research: A Methodological Discussion,” *Qualitative Research* 12, no. 6 (December 1, 2012): 630–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112439005>, 641.

⁴⁹⁴ Reinharz, “Feminist Interview Methods,” 27.

⁴⁹⁵ Reinharz, “Feminist Interview Methods,” 28.

was open with my interviewees about not being able to make claims about the truthfulness of their research areas, and I believe this openness fostered a more trusting relationship.

Data collection & analysis

This study can be considered an instrumental case study, as it looks at the particular phenomenon of counter-establishment researchers working within three specific topics of interest. Throughout all stages of the case study, I kept a researcher's journal, including observational notes and memos. I used purposive snowball sampling to locate study participants, using three specific techniques. My first interviewee, Steve, approached me in a coffee shop and identified himself as a conspiracy researcher when he overheard me talking about my research. A JFK researcher, he connected me with several colleagues, including Bill. Locating their online presences, I cold emailed several other interviewees (Don, Mark, and Sharon), who then connected me to their colleagues. All of the Missing 411 interviewees were recruited from a Reddit post in the Missing 411 subreddit (a subject-specific forum hosted on Reddit).

Certified Internal Review Board (IRB) exemption for this study was obtained in early 2020. All interviewees were informed of their rights, gave verbal consent, and were informed about the purpose of the study in accordance with UCLA IRB procedure (See figure 2 in Appendix A for the informed consent document given to all interviewees). See figure 3 in Appendix A for the interview protocol submitted to UCLA IRB. The interview structure is a modified version of the three-interview series from Seidman,⁴⁹⁶ forgoing the first life history interview and shortening the duration of the interviews from an hour and a half to between forty-five minutes and an hour and fifteen minutes. The first interview session mainly involved questions about the interviewee's background, their history with the topic, and their practices and feelings around research. The second interview session covered experiences with information

⁴⁹⁶ Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2005).

institutions (online and offline), trust in resources, and how they felt about being labeled a “conspiracy theorist,” as well as follow up questions derived from the transcript and my notes from the first session. At the end of both sessions, they were given the opportunity to ask me questions. A sample interview protocol, with notes and follow-up questions, is included in the Appendix (figure 4). As the interviews were semi-structured, not all of the questions listed were asked in every interview, nor were they worded exactly as they appear. I also asked follow-up questions that are not listed on these protocols.

All interviewees were provided with copies of the consent document, as well as the interview questionnaire, if requested. After the interview data was transcribed and the transcriptions were edited, I sent transcriptions of both interviews to each participant to have them read over them and let me know if they would like anything to be removed. Some interviewees read them and got back to me with parts to expunge, others approved of the transcripts, and others I did not hear back from. I complied with any and all requests for removal by interviewees, ensuring that they felt completely comfortable with the data I would be working with. Interviewees were also given the option to either be named in the study, choose their pseudonym, or have a pseudonym assigned to them. I changed all data relating to them to reflect pseudonyms—for interviewees who did not want to be named as participants—very early on in the process to maximize confidentiality. I also used secure online transcription services and kept backups of all audio files in secure hard drives so that they were not stored anywhere in the cloud.

Data analysis was iterative and informed by grounded theory. Theoretical categories emerged in the course of processing the data.⁴⁹⁷ Data processing entailed transcribing interview recordings soon after they were conducted, correcting the transcripts, coding them initially, and re-coding those codes to allow theoretical categories to materialize. I used the qualitative coding software NVivo to code interview transcripts and write and organize memos. The categories that emerged from this initial analysis were shaped and informed by memos. The memo book also functioned to facilitate my own reflexivity as a

⁴⁹⁷ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

researcher. Memo writing is one significant way of ensuring that the researcher works heavily with the data when developing theory through constant analysis of the data.⁴⁹⁸ Theoretical categories will then form into a symbolic interactionist, substantive theory of the counter-establishment research self.⁴⁹⁹

When performing initial coding, I coded interviews line by line, using gerunds wherever possible. Line-by-line coding “...prompt[s] you to remain open to the data and to see nuances in them.”⁵⁰⁰ This was extremely time consuming, and initial coding involved creating over 1600 individual codes. For second-level focused coding, I sorted the initial codes into emergent patterns using memos written during first-level coding as guidance. During focused coding, I made decisions about which initial codes were the most analytically important, sometimes coding initial codes in the process. From these patterns, theoretical categories emerged, becoming the different dimensions of the research self. For a list of these second-level codes, see figure 5 in Appendix. Throughout the data analysis process, I employed the constant comparative method—an analytic technique that “...generates successively more abstract concepts and theories through inductive processes of comparing data with data, data with code, code with code, code with category, category with category, and category with concept.”⁵⁰¹ Using the constant comparative method allowed me to see which aspects of the data were the most salient and which could be left aside.

Ethical concerns & limitations of design

Although participants were not compensated monetarily for their participation, they were involved in an activity of gap-bridging between the establishment academic community and communities of counter-establishment research. As I have emphasized repeatedly in this chapter, I consider participants to be collaborators on this project. Likewise, all study participants were informed of the purpose of the

⁴⁹⁸ Pickard, *Research Methods in Information*, 185.

⁴⁹⁹ Pickard, *Research Methods in Information*, 184.

⁵⁰⁰ Charmaz *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 125.

⁵⁰¹ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 342.

study in accordance with UCLA IRB procedure and were given the option to have their identities kept confidential, or to be named as participants. Participants were also given the opportunity to go over their transcribed interviews and remove any information that they were not comfortable sharing. I continually practiced researcher reflexivity through memo writing and journaling to reflect on these ethical concerns.

Self-reporting bias, along with the small sample size, is the most evident limitation of this study. The interviewing method necessarily relies on self-reported data. While this is in accordance with my feminist methodological framework and allows for participants to report their own viewpoints, I recognize that it provides results that are formed around a person's *experience* of research, rather than an objective picture of the research itself. This is why, in my results, I have focused primarily on the *research self*, grounded in symbolic interactionism. Further, because this population has not been assessed before and the objective from the beginning was to develop a substantive theory of counter-establishment research, the non-probability sampling technique of purposive sampling is the most appropriate sampling technique. However, this technique is not as robust for developing a representative sample as a probability sampling technique would be. Furthermore, I do not claim that the sample presented in this dissertation is necessarily representative of the larger "population" of counter-establishment researchers: it is small, and my recruitment techniques do not necessarily capture researchers who do not have an online presence and/or who do their research in isolation.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from interviews with thirteen participants, each of whom has been interviewed in two sessions each, most commonly around an hour long. Some participants have been given pseudonyms, and some have elected to be named in my study. Participants were diverse in terms of age, educational background, and geographic location. In video interviews, all interviewees appeared to be white, but I did not ask about their race or ethnicity, so I do not have hard data about these, or other, identity categories. Jesse Williams, Inez Millay, Felix Jones, and Jon Billman are all associated with Missing 411, although I hesitate to call all of them researchers due to the casual nature of their work. I also interviewed three JFK assassination researchers: Steve Allen, Cyril Wecht, and Bill Simpich, and five UFO researchers: Donald Schmitt, Mark Rodeghier, Thomas (Eddie) Bullard, Sharon Lombard, and Harriet Summers. All of the participants were based in the United States except for Sharon and Harriet.

This chapter presents a novel concept: the Research Self (RS). Every person has an RS; although some subtle changes may occur in different contexts, on the whole, the RS is a stable self-concept that is at the core of an individual's approach to seeking information in a systematic and protracted way. Those who habitually do research have a necessarily more complex RS than those who do not. Further, the RS is a *research* self rather than an *information seeking* self, because it outlines an individual's approach to a topic that they engage with in the long term. An Information Seeking Self would not, for instance, contain a dimension that discusses the "originating life stage," as the RS does. The RS consists of six interrelated dimensions: 1. Originating Life Stage, in which the seeker has initial experiences with the topic; 2. Motivations for doing research; 3. Methods and methodologies used in the course of conducting research; 4. Practices around and conceptualizations of research as an activity (reflexivity, emotion, and relative serious or casual approaches); 5. Identity (including base-level identities like race, culture, nationality, and gender, as well as higher-level identities that relate directly to the practice of research or the topic being researched) and 6. Epistemic approach/epistemology. The following figure presents the dimensions visually:

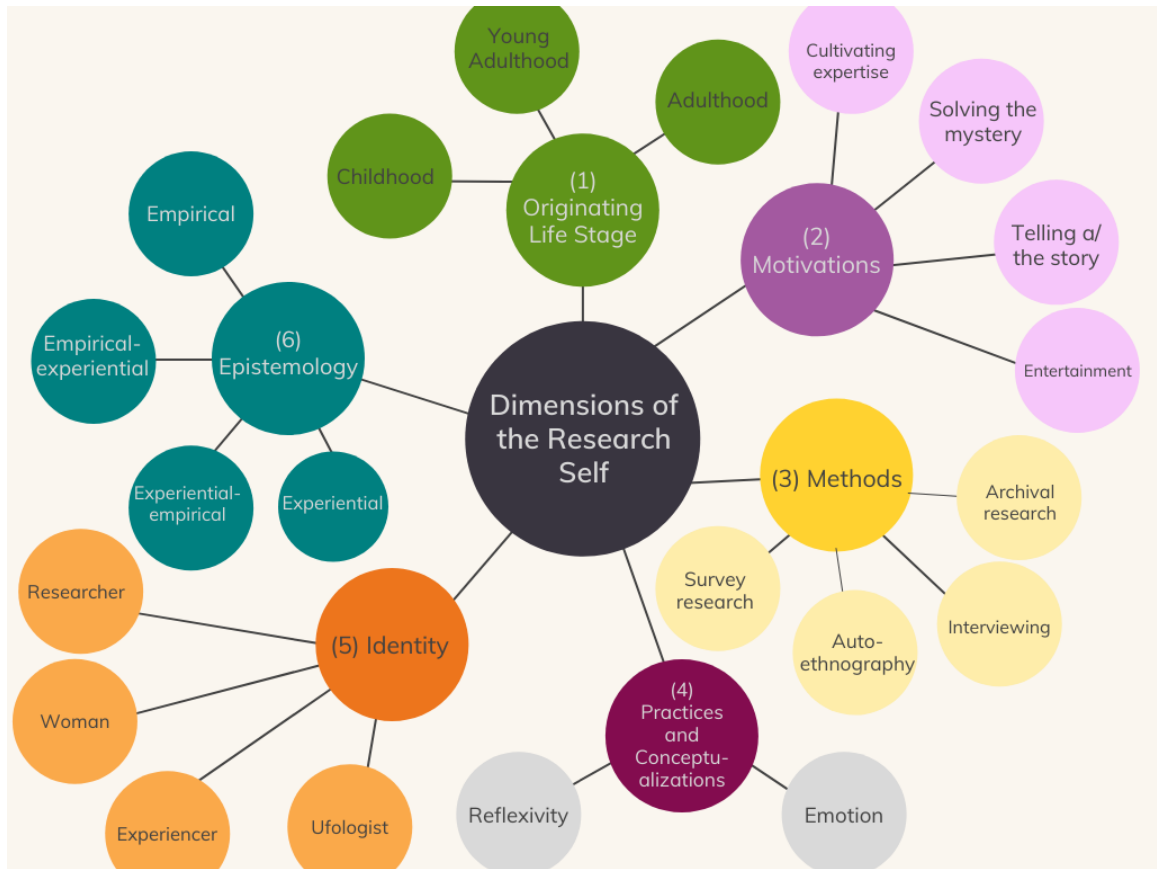


Fig. 4.1: Dimensions of the Research Self

Only dimensions 1 and 6 (see figure 4.2 below for a visualization of the spectrum of Dimension 6) have static categories; dimensions 2, 3 and 5 are iterative in construction and thus have many more categories within them than can be pictured in this visualization. Dimension 4, Practices and Conceptualizations, is abstract in nature and thus does not have individualized categories like the other dimensions. Instead, I have listed “emotions” and “reflexivity” as aspects of this dimension that can be explored in depth, if not operationalized in the same way as the categories within the other dimensions.

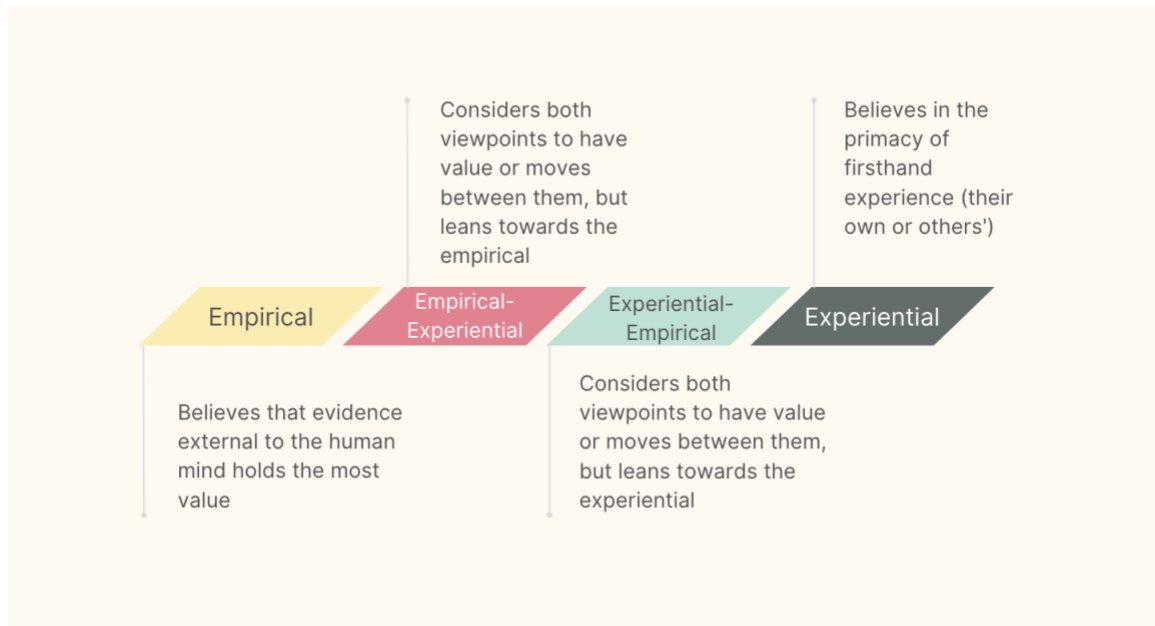


Fig. 4.2: Spectrum of Dimension 6: Epistemology

There are many existing models of information seeking and behavior (ISB), some of which were outlined in chapter 2, like Kuhlthau’s Information Seeking Process (ISP). This dissertation presents a novel information seeking framework, the Research Self (RS), which moves beyond individualized models like the ISP by taking context and self-concept into account. The RS framework builds off of the ISP, with emotion being an important aspect of Dimension 4. The Research Self is highly flexible and can be operationalized for a variety of purposes and *for any kind of researcher*. Each dimension influences and shapes how an individual conducts research and what their concomitant findings are.

This chapter is divided into subsections that correspond with the dimensions of the RS. Section I. will cover Dimensions 1 (Originating Life Stage) and 2 (Motivations); Section II. will cover Dimension 3 (Method and Methodology) Section III. will cover Dimension 4 (Practices and Conceptualizations of Research); and Section IV. will discuss Dimension 6 (Epistemology). Dimension 5 is flexible and context-driven, and thus will be discussed throughout the chapter, rather than be given its own subsection. Section V. will address a unique, formative aspect of the counter-establishment RS specifically: the relationship to conspiracy and conspiracy theory. Section VI. will include a brief discussion of the implications of the RS as a larger framework for studies of research and research practices.

Counter-establishment research is at once unique and ordinary. Some aspects of counter-establishment research parallel other kinds of (academic, establishment) research, and others are specific features of counter-establishment research. Following connections and coincidences and identifying patterns is a hallmark of so-called “conspiratorial thinking,”⁵⁰² but it is also an aspect of *all* research, no matter the topic. There is not one *style* of counter-establishment research, nor is there an overarching Counter-Establishment Research Self. While there are parallels between participants, each person has a unique RS (see tables in Appendix C for an overview of each participant’s RS). Taken together, these research selves illustrate the complexity and variety of counter-establishment research as a whole. Some participants displayed more typical “conspiratorial” traits, such as questioning authority, disbelieving expertise, and considering themselves open-minded. Others displayed other approaches to research that are less stereotypically “conspiratorial.” For example, reflexivity is not often a trait academics consider conspiracy theorists to be capable of. Yet, just as in other forms of research, some researchers are more reflexive than others—some were so reflexive, like Steve and Inez, that it helped me to develop my own practice of reflexivity. Even among a small sample size of thirteen researchers, participants described a medley of research methods, including interviewing, anthropological fieldwork, autoethnography, archival research, library research, online research, survey methods, and forensic experiments. Just as in academia, epistemic and methodological conflicts take place in different disciplines. This is particularly evident in ufology.

What makes counter-establishment research unique, beyond being labeled as paranormal or conspiratorial, has to do with enduring mystery. Counter-establishment research topics are, at some level, fundamentally unknowable. Many of these researchers will never truly find the answer, or if they think they do, they will have significant trouble convincing others. Having been captivated by these mysteries in childhood, many counter-establishment researchers in fact find the enigma at the center of these topics

⁵⁰² Jennifer A. Whitson and Adam D. Galinsky, “Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception,” *Science* 322, no. 5898 (October 3, 2008): 115–17, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1159845>.

motivating. Becoming consumed by this research and the drive to find the answers, a person’s identity as a counter-establishment researcher can become deeply connected to their selfhood over their lifetime.

I. Exploring Dimensions 1 (Originating Life Stage) & 2 (Motivations): Initial Experiences with the Subject and the Formation of the Research Self

Interviewee	Subject	Primary (research related) identity
Steve A.	JFK	screenwriter
Bill S.	JFK	author/ investigative journalist
Cyril W.	JFK	forensic pathologist
Sharon G.	UFO	director of UFO Research A—
Harriet S.	UFO	author/experiencer/ director of EERC
Eddie B.	UFO	historian/folklorist/ author
Mark R.	UFO	director of CUFOS
Don S.	UFO	author
Felix H.	M411	casual info seeker
Jesse A.	M411	casual info seeker
Jon B.	M411/ UFO	author
Inez M.	M411/UFO	casual info seeker

Figure 4.3: Interviewees and their research topics

Participants came to their research topics from different backgrounds and for different reasons. Many, but not all researchers, have formed their identities around their research topic, their particular approach to their research topic, or their reputation as it relates to their topic. Recalling Charmaz’s

conception of symbolic interactionism, which draws boundaries between self-as-process and self-as-object, this section will introduce the self-concepts of my participants, especially as they relate to research practices and the research topic. For many participants, their self-concept will be closely tied to one or both of these things. In this section, I will move from the general to the specific, first discussing initial encounters in childhood and then moving to how specific individual participants characterized their first forays into the subject, what attracted them to it, and what has kept them investigating over years and decades.

Many participants reported having their initial encounters with the topic, or with comparable subjects, in childhood. Felix, who says he has “always been interested” in the paranormal, recalls “...being in a library and finding a book on Bigfoot and reading it.” He also recalls the formative experience of listening to *Coast to Coast AM* with his grandfather. Similarly, Don recalls reading books on UFOs as a young boy. Mark also became interested at around nine or ten years of age, and Eddie described becoming interested in UFOs around the same time. Eddie recalls that his interest in UFOs was bolstered by watching a lot of science fiction movies, both before and after he developed an explicit interest in extraterrestrials and UFOs. Similarly, Sharon describes buying UFO magazines when she got her first paychecks at fifteen. Bill and Sharon both mentioned treating the research topic casually at first, and then becoming more invested in it over time. Bill read books on the assassination, but “...treated these books like beach books for ten years.” Sharon became more directly involved with UFO research through her ex-husband and ex-father in law, who would discuss UFO topics over family dinners. Seeds from childhood and young adulthood germinated for years before growing into an RS, the boundaries of which are determined by one’s views on the research topic, style of information seeking, conceptualization of oneself in *relation* to the research topic, and capacity for self-determination in context.

Steve Allen, the first person I interviewed, is a screenwriter and filmmaker living in the United States. Unlike some of the other interviewees, he describes his first encounter with the topic as happening in adulthood:

I never was particularly interested in the assassination cause I just figured it's been so pored over. I saw *JFK* and like...I get it, some spooky stuff happened there. But, I mean, I'm a screenwriter and filmmaker, so stories, you know, and this history and how we make our myths, are very interesting to me. And I was reading the newspaper one day and there was an article in the *New York Times* about two books coming out about Oswald's defection to the Soviet Union...And I was just sort of blown away, like, wait a minute, the dude that shot the president defected to our sworn enemy, how is this not a bigger deal? And I asked around, to other people, did you know this? And people—there's just like so much in the whole JFK thing that like that, that fact got lost. And so I decided I wanted to write a movie about Oswald...

This aspect of mythmaking is something that Steve returned to over and over again in our interviews. On the hunt for compelling stories, he stumbled across the subject of Oswald. Although he cheerfully identified himself as a conspiracy researcher in our initial encounter, Steve's primary motivation for conducting research is finding and creating a compelling story: his self-concept is most solidly rooted in being a storyteller, a writer, a creative individual. The Oswald narrative and the concomitant conspiracy researcher label, which he does not seem to view as necessarily negative or pejorative, is more related to his self-as-*process* as opposed to his more stable storyteller self. His research into the Kennedy assassination is connected to his selfhood, but only as a process that may solidify his more stable identity as a storyteller.

Bill Simpich is a retired civil rights attorney residing in the United States. In answering the question of how he came to start doing research on the Kennedy assassination, Bill went into great detail about how he developed and enacted his own moral philosophy through his work as a lawyer, and how significant events in the 1970s and 1980s affected him and his political thought. When he first encountered the topic in college, Bill refused the call to the journey,⁵⁰³ so to speak, of Kennedy assassination research. By the time he fully committed to being a Kennedy assassination researcher, "I really felt like I didn't have a choice as someone who loves investigation of the power structure." He describes his lengthy journey in coming to that point: reading a book by a "conspiratorial type person I know...basically saying that all the [Symbionese Liberation Army] were informants." Bill had a profound emotional and intellectual reaction to reading this article:

⁵⁰³ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (New World Library, 2008).

The important reason I tell all this is just to explain how much paranoia that raised for me that night and afterwards. I was like, that's not a good sensation I'm having, you know, and I felt there was some truth there, but I also felt there were a lot of untruths in what she was saying. I don't think all the young people were informants, but, nonetheless it—you know, the notion that they're able to manipulate American society with one kidnapping, in a strategic way. And I do think that's what happened. Although, I've never quite felt I've got enough to prove it in court. I think the odds are more likely than not. I gave up researching it for that reason.

Bill describes resolving his unpleasant feelings of paranoia through research: he was not satisfied with the conclusions of the original article he read, but he was also unsatisfied with the mainstream narrative around the SLA and Patty Hearst's kidnapping. He attempted to resolve these feelings through research, although he ultimately stopped that line of research because he didn't feel he could make enough of an impact pursuing it through legal channels.

His subsequent work with Earth First! furthered his development of a progressive, leftist political philosophy. In 1990, He was in the midst of advising renowned labor organizer and environmental activist Judi Bari, connecting her with an attorney who could help her with legal battles relating to her activism, when a pipe bomb went off in her car.⁵⁰⁴ As she recovered in the hospital, she was arrested (along with fellow activist and sometime romantic partner Darryl Cherny) by the FBI. The FBI accused her and Darryl of planting the bomb themselves.⁵⁰⁵ Bill then became involved in fighting on behalf of Cherny and Bari for twelve years. He describes it thus:

The DA wouldn't take the case. We fended them off for a little bit during this period. And, he said, I'm not going to charge this case. There's not enough evidence!...We fought this battle for twelve years. I was joined by a barrage of attorneys, stayed in the case, when it was all over, we got a 4 million-plus verdict. Half of it was from the FBI, half of it from the Oakland PD, and the majority of the money and the findings were based on the fact that these agencies were disrupting their first amendment activities to organize. Really fundamental, really fundamental, really wonderful way to win that case. It wasn't just on narrow fourth amendment search and seizure stuff, but deliberately seeing the situation and saying, we want to bring these people down. And now we've got this great opportunity in our lap to do it. Now, of course, for twelve years, we had to wrestle with all of our instincts to go farther and say we know who did it. We think the agencies were in on it. And we had to stifle all those instincts over and over and over again for twelve years.

⁵⁰⁴ “30 Years Ago: The Bombing of Earth First! Activists Judi Bari and Darryl Cherny,” Trees Foundation, May 20, 2020, <https://treesfoundation.org/2020/05/30-years-ago-in-may-the-bombing-of-earth-first-activists-judi-bari-and-darryl-cherney/>.

⁵⁰⁵ inforefuge, “Judi Bari Biography: Immortal Voice,” *InfoRefuge* (blog), June 5, 2009, <https://inforefuge.com/judi-bari-bio>.

This long legal battle Bill spearheaded solidified his disillusionment with and mistrust of the powers that be in the United States. While he did ultimately win the case, it was twelve years of himself and his colleagues suppressing their instincts to accuse the CIA and other governmental agencies, because that would not work within the confines of the legal system. In the middle of this lengthy battle, *JFK* came out, which brought the assassination back into his consciousness: he felt he was older, wiser, and could better understand the JFK assassination and its mysteries. Not only did his experiences with reading about and researching the SLA and working on behalf of Judy Bari solidify his already extant instinct to be skeptical of the United States government and thus counter-establishment in his worldview, but they also bolstered his confidence as an activist and alternative researcher.

As a JFK assassination researcher, Bill has been prolific in his writings and his work with encoded documents. He sits on the board of and works frequently with the Mary Ferrell Foundation, named after the prolific Kennedy Assassination researcher. The Mary Ferrell Foundation is a non-profit group “...engaged in an ongoing effort to bring accessible and interactive history to a new generation of critical thinkers. With a wide topic base including the assassinations of the 1960s, the Watergate scandal, and post-Watergate intelligence abuse investigations, the MFF’s vast digital archive...contains nearly 2 million pages of documents, government reports, books, essays, hours of multimedia, and innovative research tools.”⁵⁰⁶ Bill’s book *State Secret* is available to read on their website, and he has played a significant role in their CIA Cryptonyms Project, which crowdsources decoding the cryptonyms and pseudonyms used by the CIA. They have decoded an enormous number of them and make their results available for public use while reading declassified CIA documents. Decoders classify the decoded name as “documented,” “probable,” and “speculative” in order of how sure they are about the identity of the person. Bill goes beyond this, however: “I will try to do more than just identify who the person is or what the project is. I try to write a profile of what that person did and what that project engaged in. And then you've got a dossier! And now you're in full-fledged spookland [laughs]. But you've also identified the

⁵⁰⁶ “About MFF,” accessed February 14, 2022, https://www.maryferrell.org/pages/About_MFF.html.

item for history, which is just as important.” He goes to great lengths to conduct what is essentially public history, countering the obfuscation inherent in government documents that are declassified yet still full of code names and redactions. Bill engages in this work because he wants the truth to come out—he does not do it for his own reputation by any means. As someone who has fought the injustices of the American governmental system for years, his research into the JFK assassination carries his self-concept of an activist and a critic of power structures forward after retirement.

Dr. Cyril Wecht was the final JFK assassination researcher I spoke with, although I did ask all of my respondents what they thought of the assassination, and some had done more research on it than others. Cyril is not so much a Kennedy assassination researcher as he is a historical figure in the assassination narrative. A forensic scientist who had been involved in giving professional testimony in court cases for years, he was the first civilian to discover that Kennedy’s brain was missing in 1972. He has been a vocal skeptic against the Warren Report ever since. When I asked about how he became involved in the Kennedy assassination case, he had plenty to tell me, reciting it almost automatically. Like some of my other participants, this seemed to me to be a story he had told many times. He recalled doing research to give a talk on the Warren Report at the American Academy of Forensic Sciences:

So, I went to the Carnegie Library here in Pittsburgh, and they have the twenty-six volumes of the Warren Commission report, but with—except for some small index, they have no overall index, it was quite frustrating. Finally, I located what I needed, and prepared. I gave my talk in February 1966, in Chicago at the Drake Hotel, and then everything moved forward after that. I got contacted by some of the early critics and Mark Lane. And then Sylvia Meagher, early textbook writers, researchers. And then I was on various national television programs. And so the next formal involvement was I was contacted by a District Attorney, Jim Garrison, in the Clay Shaw case. And I consulted with him. And I wanted to testify, but I told him I would have to see the autopsy report. So on that occasion, for that purpose, I testified, that was going to be the first of three times that I have testified under oath regarding the JFK assassination... And the judge immediately ruled that the government should give me access to the autopsy materials, the government attorneys belatedly, arrogantly set up and said to their words, we shall appeal until hell freezes over something like that. And then I did not get to see the materials. And so I chose not to testify, because I did not feel that I could consult and testify as a forensic pathologist without having seen the autopsy materials. So that regrettably passed by because Garrison was all set with everybody else, and they had to proceed without delay.

Cyril here details how he became swept up into the developing investigation of the Kennedy

Assassination post–Warren Report. His frustration with the Warren Report and its lack of navigability is

apparent. The fact that Cyril refused to testify without having seen the autopsy materials speaks to the strength of his self-concept as a reliable forensic pathologist committed to honesty and integrity in his work. In this quotation, he also sets himself up as having had an antagonistic relationship with the government, who despite the order of a federal judge, refused to give him access to JFK's autopsy materials.

This staunch governmental opaqueness and his consequential incapability to testify for the Garrison trial seems to be a primary motivating factor in his refusal to give up on attempting to view the autopsy materials. In 1971, a five-year moratorium on viewing the materials had expired and a “recognized expert in the field of pathology with a serious historical practice” could apply to view the autopsy materials. Cyril emphasized that he undeniably met such qualification— not only was he a certified pathologist, but he also held several prominent leadership positions in professional organizations related to forensic science. A journalist helped him get through the red tape, and he was *finally* granted access. Recounting his discovery that Kennedy's brain was missing in August 1972, Cyril emphasized that he was not the first person to find out that the brain was missing—that many people knew—but that he was the first person to publicize the fact that it was missing. As he told me this, his tone bordered on the incredulous. He went on to describe the actions he took directly after making his discovery:

The next thing is I was contacted by the Rockefeller commission...I testified in 1975, before the Rockefeller Commission for more than four hours...I was appointed [to the House Select Committee on Assassinations] as a member of the pathology panel, and I reviewed everything there. And then, in 1978, I was now testifying for the third time before the entire congressional committee sitting in Washington...my eight colleagues and their further quality panel...they all they had extensive criticisms of the inadequacy, the incompetence of the pathologist who did the autopsy, but somehow they arrived at a conclusion that nevertheless, they had gotten a great sense, and they agreed with the ultimate conclusion. So I testified, [giving] a minority report...And, by the way, then '79, the House Committee submitted their report, and they said, with a high degree of probability...There were two shooters. And yet, despite the fact that this was a bipartisan committee, and nothing was ever done, a committee like that established by the United States Congress, not a damn thing was ever done.

Here, Cyril details his experiences with all of the committees that reviewed the case (which I outlined briefly in Chapter 1)—he was asked by every single one to testify. And the one where he filed a minority report, the House Select Committee on Assassinations, concluded that there may have been a second

shooter (see chapter 1 for context). Cyril is evidently very angry that even when this final committee concluded that there was likely a second shooter, “not a damn thing was ever done.” His frustration is palpable: like Bill, his self-concept is likely fully tied up in the ongoing injustice that he perceives the government as having perpetrated. Cyril goes on to talk about more recent work he has done, including speaking engagements, writing a chapter in Josiah Thompson’s famous *Six Seconds in Dallas*, and becoming the first chairman of the group Citizens Against Political Assassinations. He continues to be actively involved in the topic even as he approaches his late eighties, a testament to how deeply it is involved with his selfhood and what an impact it has had on his life.

The three Kennedy Assassination researchers I spoke with demonstrated unique Research Selves. Steve’s RS is rooted in his identity as a storyteller, and he lets his hunger for a story guide his research interests. He is most directly interested in Oswald as a *figure* whose life is an intriguing mystery. Bill’s research-self is rooted in a desire for justice, to fight back against the corruption and cruelty of the American government by revealing the truth about the Kennedy assassination. Cyril’s motivation is similar; his RS is rooted not in traditional research of the kind that Steve and Bill do; rather, it is in his own expertise as a forensic pathologist and in his reputation as the person who discovered and revealed JFK’s missing brain. Like Bill, he is motivated to reveal the truth to the American public. Even within a single topic, we can see that there are many motivations for pursuing research about and advocating for counter-establishment theories about the JFK assassination.

I interviewed five ufologists. Donald Schmitt was one of the first researchers to publish a book on Roswell, co-authoring at least fourteen subsequent books on the topic, including *UFO Crash at Roswell* (1991), *Witness to Roswell: Unmasking the 60-Year Cover-Up* (2007), and *UFO Secrets Inside Wright-Patterson: Eyewitness Accounts from the Real Area 51* (2019). He has also led archeological digs at the crash site, which he described to me in detail. He has interviewed hundreds of witnesses to the Roswell incident. Further, he worked with J. Allen Hynek at the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS), as the Director of Special Investigations, for a decade. When asked how he came to the subject, he began speaking about

his memories of the Kennedy assassination. He remembered being a young boy, in school, and watching the event unfold on TV, both at school and at home: “And that entire weekend I was glued to the television. And, you know, it really demonstrated the impact, the power that the media had. They brought you the entire situation into your home. And there was a book that came out after the Warren Commission did its investigation on the assassination and the Warren report that then followed and all the words that were bandied about that time: ‘cover up,’ ‘whitewash,’ demonstrating that there was an agenda that there was something else at stake here.” His core memory of the Kennedy assassination consists of a realization that more was going on than the media or the government was telling him—he is likely here referencing Harold Weisberg’s *Whitewash: The Report on the Warren Report*, which came out in 1966. Don continues, recalling being a voracious reader and seeing a book on UFOs in a bookstore:

I see the cover of this book and there it's using those exact same words,—coverup, whitewash, conspiracy—but it wasn't a book about the Kennedy assassination. It was a book entitled *Flying Saucers, Serious Business* by a *New York Times* reporter by the name of Frank Edwards. And the title of the book was taken from the air force manual. There was a chapter in the air force manual at that time called “flying saucers: serious business”...And there was one particular chapter in the book that was titled “Who's Driving?” In other words, who's behind the phenomenon? There's a *there* there, so to speak. And then the next book I got was *Flying Saucer Occupants*. And there were some cases in Wisconsin right here in my backyard. And, um, it wasn't so much as being *hooked*. It was a case of, if any of this is true, we're talking about the biggest story of the millennium. And how do I walk away from that? How do I treat that as just old news or just a curiosity or the entertainment section and *USA Today*, that type of thing?

The fact that Don contextualizes his interest in UFOs *within* the Kennedy assassination is intriguing—what does it say his relationship to both topics, and about his RS? For Don, witnessing the Kennedy assassination unfold in real time made him skeptical of the government and its intentions and piqued his interest in things the government was concealing from the public. In the final sentences of this statement, Don emphasizes the seriousness of his interest—for him, it is expressly *not* entertainment. He wants to be the one to uncover the truth, to uncover the “biggest story of the millennium.” The desire to be the person who uncovers something remarkable is a motivating factor for him, and for many other participants. His RS grew out of his childhood interest in what the government is hiding, and a subsequent desire for, in some sense, glory in being the so-called expert on Roswell.

Dr. Mark Rodeghier, who also worked closely with Hynek, has been the director of CUFOS since 1986, when Hynek passed away. I contacted him through the CUFOS website. He has written extensively on ufology, publishing in the *International UFO Reporter* and the *Journal for UFO Studies (JUFOS)*. He holds a PhD in the Sociology of Science from the University of Illinois at Chicago. His dissertation, titled “Factors Influencing Attitudes Toward Controversial Research: Quantitatively Disentangling the Social from the Scientific,” was a quantitative study comparing the “relative influence” of social factors (including class, gender, age, and institutional affiliation) to “scientific” or epistemic influences.” The study measured scientists’ attitudes towards two “controversial topics”: the search for extraterrestrial intelligent life and the identification and exploration of UFOs.⁵⁰⁷ Like Don, Mark’s initial interest in UFOs stemmed from childhood, discovering the subject when he was around ten years old:

I wasn't studying UFOs that seriously. That's how I first became interested. And that was back in the 1960s. When UFOs were such a hot topic, you know, they seem to be a hot topic now, and they are, but it's nothing like it was back then. And, you know, regular newspapers would have UFO sightings in them, if you can believe that. And television shows and radio shows would once in a while have a UFO report. And of course, there were many books. And so, as a, again, a nine- or ten-year-old kid I got interested and read what was available, and kept up my interest for many years, but didn't get—I didn't join a UFO group or anything. I just concentrated on school and other things and then went away to college. And in 1973 ... as an undergrad, there was a large UFO wave in this country. And as an outgrowth of that, Dr. Hynek...said, “You know, there needs to be a place that's more professional, and more serious about studying UFOs than the groups that are out there...I want to do something different.” And so he founded [CUFOS] in late '73. And I heard about it and I said, “Hey, [chuckles] this is great, you know, I'm—I'd love to get involved.” And so in '74, I volunteered. And I've been involved with the Center, but also in the field, ever since.

Mark and Don’s early encounters with UFOs run in parallel: the initial spark happened in childhood, books were involved in stoking the interest, and both wanted to study UFOs in a serious, rather than a casual, way. In fact, it wasn’t until Mark saw a serious research initiative being put together by Hynek that he even wanted to be involved with UFO research.

Mark reflected further on his post-PhD career path, which led him to independent work as a statistical researcher: “Well, it's, I would say it because you know I've said several times that I, because of

⁵⁰⁷ Mark Rodeghier, “Factors Influencing Attitudes Toward Controversial Research: Quantitatively Disentangling the Social from the Scientific” (Chicago, University of Illinois, 1994), xi.

my background, my PhD and working...I never became a professor, of course. But what I've done is I got a lot of stat background in my—and I like stats. And so I'm an independent consultant, doing statistical data analysis, and also, as I said, survey research. And, lately, I've gotten into, in the last 10-15 years, into clinical research, medicine.” He describes his “day job” work proudly, detailing the trajectory that has led him to his current work in the medical field. While doing so, he problematizes the notion of “real” and “false” work. Mark’s RS is serious: he takes himself as a researcher and the research he produces quite seriously, considering himself to be a serious, scientific, academically minded researcher in both his day job and in his work with CUFOS.

Mark connected me to Dr. Thomas (Eddie) Bullard, another prominent ufologist who has similarly published extensively in ufological circles and is on the Board of Directors of CUFOS. Bullard, who holds a PhD in folklore from Indiana University, wrote his dissertation on UFOs as a type of folklore, charting the history of UFO sightings, developing a typology of “a limited number of distinct and recurrent story types,” and concluding that “UFO stories thus demonstrate a family relationship to accounts in folklore, mythology and religion and reincarnate age-old folkloric themes in an acceptable guise for an age of science and technology.”⁵⁰⁸ Bullard is also the author of *The Myth and Mystery of UFOs* (2010), which examines the history of UFO sightings in the United States. Eddie’s research projects are long form: his book, which came out in 2010, appears to be based on his dissertation work. When asked about his background with the topic, he, like Mark and Don, cited an interest from childhood:

I have an interest in UFOs that goes back to when I was a child. I saw a lot of science fiction movies in the 1950s and kept an interest in UFOs, cultivated it, started reading everything I could get my hands on. So when it came time to do my dissertation, I kind of had a sort of notion of what I wanted to do, I already had done a lot of the preparation for it. They were, the university, at least the folklore department, was happy enough to accept me. I kept on after that. Employment opportunities in folklore by the early 1970s were not so good. So I kept on working for the university in the library system, and did a lot of work on UFOs. I started doing research on the airships for the dissertation, and started doing it even more vigorously. And that went on for years and years. Interlibrary Loan, visits to various sites, archives around the country. Even now, with more of the material on the internet, we've got even more work with that. I'm finally getting

⁵⁰⁸ Thomas E. Bullard, “Mysteries in the Eye of the Beholder: UFOs and Their Correlates as a Folkloric Theme Past and Present” (University of Indiana, 1982).

around to writing the book after all these years. I also did work on UFO abductions. I'm a board member of the Center for UFO studies. Just about—various other organizations sort of built a—what do you call it—a whole under-the-table career in ufology [chuckles].

Like Mark, Eddie refers to his ufological research as an “under-the-table career.” Eddie’s RS has to do with a self-concept as a folklorist, and as an historical researcher. The book he talks about getting around to writing is one explicitly about 19th-century airship sightings, which he has been tracking through different archives for decades.

Eddie’s research on airships is the primary focus of his current archival research. He summarized the story of the airships by framing it through his first archival encounter in the library:

When I started off I just kind of found this—I knew the airship incidents had happened. And one day I was just wandering around in the deep bowels of the Indiana University Library and I found these old bound newspapers—Chicago, Indianapolis—and started looking through them and started finding a bunch of information about this airship. At first I thought well, hey, you know, it does sound like it might be some kind of UFO. Maybe a little reinterpreted in terms of the time. But, you know, really something like what's being seen today. Maybe it's real evidence for spaceship visitation. But then the more I read, the more I realized that this thing was really being described in terms appropriate for the time. That it was like—it was some kind of gas bag that held up a car which had passengers in it. And the car had a searchlight in there and some kind of propeller or wings to fly the thing. And, you know, it does not sound like sleek, shiny flying saucer of later years. So it became pretty obvious to me that there was something going on here besides just the flying saucers, according to the ufologists' narrative, people were seeing at that time. They certainly weren't the same. Maybe the aliens have developed technology over the next 50 years and developed flying saucers in that time. But more likely you're just getting people seeing Venus, fire balloons, just like the critics said. And that's the explanation for it. So my feeling was that, okay this is not—this is not ufology as we would normally leap to it, but it's an essential thing to understand if there's going to be any kind of scientific ufology, is that what can happen to people when they get an idea in mind, and start seeing things to confirm that idea.

Eddie’s research is rooted in an awareness of both historical context and confirmation bias. Here, he recalls reflexive research moments: moving from excitement at the potential for sightings that fit in with the established ufological narrative, which could constitute another clue pointing to extraterrestrial contact, towards the recognition that these sightings were deeply shaped by their socio-historical-cultural contexts. The more archival research Eddie did, the more he amended the proto-UFO position that originally drew him to the airships. That more information changed his belief system goes directly counter to much of what is assumed about “conspiracy-theorist” styles of research.⁵⁰⁹ Further, Eddie

⁵⁰⁹ Such as Sunstein and Vermeule. “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures*.”

directly states that “it’s an essential thing to understand if there is going to be any kind of scientific ufology.” Historical rootedness and context of the phenomenon, and the ability to parse out one thing from another, is, for Eddie, a wholly necessary step in advancing a serious study of UFOs.

Eddie concludes his initial discussion of his airships research by talking about what he thought was happening in this particular instance:

It was just a lot of fun to search these things down and see just how varied the stories became. Mostly they didn't vary very much. Mostly what people did is they just saw a light in the sky, or [an] object, or what they thought was an object bearing a light in the sky. And you do get the more elaborate stories of people that talk about being carried off in a ride or on an airship, or talking to the pilots; the crashes. All sorts of humorous kinds of treatments. But it was—always been a really fascinating example of human excess and interest, a mass panic type of thing. Or mass craze. So that was my thinking about it even though you might love it, it's not anything more than a human event.

Human excess and interest, a mass panic, a human event: when asked to elaborate on what he means by this, Eddie cited a plethora of historical examples: the great fear of 1789 in France, early 19th century sea serpent sightings, Spring Heeled Jack in the 1830s, who would recur in different places throughout Europe over the 19th century, the oily man in Indonesia, the Jersey Devil of New Jersey, the Moth Man of West Virginia. “This is one of these...some kind of idea, deep in our minds, apparently. And it reactivates in different forms, different ways, over and over...It’s an interesting thing to work out and see how it progresses, how it changes, adapts. But it does do that. And it's an interesting notion to explain how any number of beliefs get started and maintained.” Eddie’s identity as a folklorist and historian is glaringly apparent in his answers to my questions: he has a wide variety of historical examples to draw on, and he also seems fascinated by the mystery of perception, the human brain, and enduring myths—rather than suggesting that these sightings are somehow instances of the same creature, Eddie suggests that the mysteries of these sightings are somehow within our own brains, derived from and cultivated within our own social fabric and community consciousness. Eddie’s RS is firmly ufological—although he does not identify as a ufologist, but rather as a historian—but also markedly skeptical of extraterrestrial

explanations for UFOs. He is a historian, an archival researcher, and also, like Mark, takes the topic seriously and wants others to do so as well.

Harriet Summers and Sharon Lombard, the two remaining ufologists I spoke with, hailed from neighboring countries outside of North America. I got in touch with Sharon for a very specific reason: I had not, until interviewing her, been able to locate or speak with any researchers who were not white men. I found a blog post Sharon had written in 2014, titled “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus — so where does that leave Ufology?” about her frustrations with gender and the type of “masculine” scientific research that is reified in the field. Sharon is the president of UFO Research A——, the premier UFO research group in her country. She has spoken all over the world about UFOs and has had several sightings and one contact experience. Sharon connected me with her friend and colleague Harriet Summers, founder and director of the Extraterrestrial Experiencers Research Consortium (EERC). Harriet had several contact experiences. She has written a book and spoken around the world about her experiences on board extraterrestrial spacecraft and the insight she has gained from extraterrestrials. Both Sharon and Harriet have conducted a significant amount of field research, interviewing people who have sightings or contact experiences.

Sharon’s initial experience with the research topic occurred in adulthood; as mentioned above, she was introduced to it by her ex-husband and his family. Her ex-husband published in the *Journal of UFO Studies* when it was operative but is no longer as active in the field as she is. When asked about how she became interested in the research topic, Sharon responded:

I've had an interest in the paranormal for almost all my life, and paranormal and other subjects that relate to it—thinking outside of the box, basically. So that's sort of led me up very many paths...I don't just organize the UFO meetings and run those, but I also established an afterlife discussion group back in 2012...so, I have a lot of interest in all sorts of things, you know, science, space, new technology, the environment, things that affect society. I like to watch social trends. I've worked as a clinical hypnotherapist. I like to watch, you know, people watching, trying to understand what makes them tick, basically.

Sharon immediately makes it clear that she is not *just* a UFO person: her self-concept is more expansive than that. Though she is known in her country as the leader of UFO Research A——, Sharon seems to

consider herself a generalist in terms of topic, being interested in a wide variety of topics related to the paranormal.

A retired schoolteacher, Harriet's RS is distinct among all of the ufologists I spoke to: she is herself an experiencer, having had several experiences onboard extraterrestrial craft. While Mark and Eddie are invested in having the wider society, including science and academia, take ufology seriously, Harriet wants herself and other experiencers to be taken seriously by *other ufologists*—she often feels left out of larger conversations because of her status as an experiencer, sometimes because of her gender, and sometimes because she is not based in the United States.

Harriet's initial contact experience was, in her words, a *catalyzing moment*. It is evident as she recounts this initial contact experience—she has had many since then—that she has told the story many times: “But when I had this catalyst experience, it was terrifying. I was with my flat mate who was actually a scientist, a male, and he was a scientist. So when he didn't believe there was such a thing as UFOs, whereas I did because as an eight year old, I'd seen one.” Immediately, Harriet sets up a gendered difference between herself and her friend: she is the open-minded woman, the believer, and he is the male, skeptic scientist. This dynamic recalls a gender-swapped Mulder-Scully *X-Files* dynamic,⁵¹⁰ eliminating the subversiveness of Mulder's open-mindedness and Scully's scientific skepticism. This tension continues throughout her recounting of the story and comes up in different forms throughout our interview. Like many of the other researchers, Harriet's initial experience with the research topic occurred in childhood. But unlike many of the other researchers, instead of reading a book or seeing a film that piqued her interest, she had an encounter with a UFO. Initial experiences with the topic seem to, at least in some circumstances, determine the shape of one's RS in adulthood: Don, Mark, and Eddie all encountered the topic initially in books and movies, but Harriet had a sighting. Ultimately, the three who had book encounters tended to take “researcher” and “expert” as their primary research identity; for

⁵¹⁰ Linda Badley, “Scully Hits the Glass Ceiling: Postmodernism, Postfeminism, Posthumanism, and the X-Files,” in *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. Elyce Rae Helford (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 61–90.

Harriet, her primary research identity became “experiencer” or “communicator.” This divide is a gendered one, paralleling, almost poetically, her experience with her scientist friend in her initial contact experience.

She continued recounting this first contact experiences, recalling the environment and speaking in sentences that have a prose-like quality:

So when this experience happened to us, we were traveling on a country road back to a city where we lived. We'd been down to visit friends on a farm. And on our way back, it was late afternoon sunshine, about, perhaps, 4:00, and everything looked lovely and golden. And the trees were just starting to look like silhouettes. It was a lovely golden autumn afternoon.

Describing the setting of her experience in detail, Harriet demonstrates her storytelling abilities and the clarity of her memory, setting the scene for the rest of the recounting. Symbolic interactionism assumes dynamic and ever-changing relationships between the self, the collective/society, and the environment.⁵¹¹

In the above quote, Harriet set up her relationship to the environment around her, establishing the normalcy and peacefulness of the scene. This allows her to emphasize the subsequent changed environment and the disorientation that will ultimately upend her concept of self and environment.

Something about the descriptive language makes this telling seem both rehearsed and poetic. The rest of the story likewise seems like she has told it many times:

And we saw these lights ahead of us over the hills, they disappeared, reappeared, disappeared, reappeared several times, either in that position, or directly adjacent to us over the hills next to us. And then they disappeared. And by that time, we'd come to a halt, we'd come down out of some hills. And we were about to go on a two-and-a-half kilometer long straight, across a riverbed. So we stopped the car, looked around, couldn't see anything, so proceeded, we'd only gone a couple hundred meters. And he said, "Oh my god, whatever it is, it's coming up behind us." And I stuck my head out the window, there was a mess of light, sort of oval shaped, wider than the road, coming up very quickly behind the car. Within a split second, it was over the car. The bright light was so bright, it was painful. There was a deafening, screaming kind of grinding sound, a mechanical sound, which was terrifying. I remember trying—it was as if time slowed down, is the only way I can put it. I tried to turn my head to look at my flat mate who was driving. It seemed to take ages to get my head around. And when I did, I saw that his hands had dropped to his lap and his head was against the door jamb and his eyes were shut. So he'd conked out. And within seconds, I must have conked out too because I don't remember anymore. I do remember feeling the car leave the ground and that feeling in your stomach as an aircraft leaves the tarmac. And the next thing I remember is the feeling of flotation. So, obviously the car was in the air. It was pitch black. I didn't know where I was, I felt as though I had just woken up. And I heard my flat mate start murmuring and then swearing and wondering what was going on and asking questions, then

⁵¹¹ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 269.

the feeling of the car hitting the road, which was quite a thump. The lights coming on, the motor starting, and we were now at the far end of the straight because we traveled this road frequently. And we were about to go over a one-lane bridge. So he was frantically gaining control of the vehicle to get it over the one lane bridge and not end up in the river.

As she recalls her catalyzing contact experience, so many of the memories she describes are embodied and verbalized as feelings: the sensation in the pit of her stomach as the car was lifted into the air, the terror she felt seeing the “mess of light” behind the car. Harriet’s catalyzing core memory is given meaning by the work that she does on a day-to-day basis with her EERC. Her research work (primarily interviewing other experiencers and people who have had sightings), subsequent contact experiences she has had, and this initial catalyzing experience all inform and interpret one another in a kind of dialectical relationship. Harriet’s RS is predicated on a variety of factors, including her status as an experiencer, her gender, and her non-American nationality.

That she had this catalyzing experience alongside another person (her scientist friend) turns it into a socially as well as an environmentally charged experience:

So we argued for quite some time, and about what it was here, coming into play was my reality, that UFOs exist, and his reality that they don't and there's no scientific explanation for anything like that. It has to be something natural. So we argued for a while but we both agreed our mouths were completely dry, you could hardly get enough saliva to speak. We felt exhausted and confused and angry and upset and our hands kept sweating and our under arms would prickle with adrenaline and we eventually lapsed into silence. And when we got home, the rest of our flatmates told us we were an hour and a half...late. We were expected to arrive when the news came on. Our tea was in the oven and it was ruined. And we had no explanation to offer them.

She lists the feelings she felt, emphasizing the physical sensations and the emotions, as well as the time they lost during the experience. Rather than listing the feelings and sensations as ones that she had herself, she states that they both experienced these emotions in the course of the experience. The fact that her friend, whose primary identifiers are that he is a man and a scientist, shared this experience with her—his interpretation almost doesn’t matter except for how it interacts with and shapes hers—lends the experience legitimacy. They shared not only all of the catalyzing experience, but also the subsequent feelings that accompanied it, emphasizing the phenomenological undeniability of the event *as a thing that happened*. Harriet does not mention her co-experiencer again. It seems that his main functionality is to lend validity to her story: if it happened to a scientist and he had no explanation for it, then it must have

been something inexplicable and potentially extraterrestrial. Symbolic interactionists consider situations to be real because they are real in their consequences.⁵¹² Harriet's initial extraterrestrial experience, and all subsequent experiences, are real because, for her and in her life, they have concrete effects.

Not only does this initial contact experience pique Harriet's extant interest in the topic of UFOs and extraterrestrials, but it, alongside all of the following contact experiences she ends up having (in which she boards craft and speaks with extraterrestrials), gives her a measure of expertise about extraterrestrials. In a blog post from March 2021, however, Harriet denies the possibility of any ufologist claiming expertise:

Some ufologists talk about themselves, as 'experts', 'leaders in the field', and 'world famous.' I have been an experiencer all my life, have spoken publicly since 1989, established the EERC and [another research org] have talked with countless fellow communicators and space travelers and have researched the sighting and contact phenomena for over forty years. Yet, I would never apply any of these ostentatious terms to myself. Nor have I ever heard any experiencers claim these labels. We are all still in the beginning stages of trying to understand what may be the most significant series of events on the course of human civilization in the history of our existence. None of us are experts in this enormous, complicated subject.⁵¹³

Because of the complexity of belief and practice within the UFO field, Harriet denies the possibility of anyone claiming expertise, even while she touts her own qualifications within the field. For Harriet, any ufologist who claims to be an expert is essentially proving themselves to be *less* rather than *more* credible. She also demonstrates that her perspective on the collective is broader than those who are skeptical of extraterrestrial visitation: "communicators" and "space travelers" know the collective to be wider and broader than those who do not have extraterrestrial encounters, because they know it to *include extraterrestrials*. Her broader collective-concept thus influences and determines her self-concept. Rejection of expertise is a core aspect of that self-concept.

Sharon also discusses having had "sightings and a close encounter," putting her in a similar, if not the same, group with Harriet. She recalled these: "I mean, the sightings...[I've had]...about six I think it is, but one was in '92. And there were eight other witnesses. So they all saw it. So I knew what I was

⁵¹² Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 272.

⁵¹³ Some words in this quote have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

seeing wasn't a figment of my imagination.” Like Harriet, having other witnesses to her sightings helped her to feel vindicated by corroborating what she had seen. These sightings were social occurrences. Her close encounter, by contrast, was an isolated experience:

And in the close encounter, well, I didn't talk about that for about 15 years. I thought it was a hallucination... So, um, and I just, it didn't. It didn't—it left me with questions, because it wasn't a full-blown experience in that I was taken on board a craft and had, you know, experiments done. I mean, all that sort of stuff. But I had these three beings appear next to me next to my bed during the night and I was wide awake. So it was—it was terrifying. But because I didn't talk about it for so long, not publicly, I guess I didn't dissect it much? I still don't because it's just there. And there's questions about it, but I'm just—I just don't feel the need to dig into it too much. You know, because my life's gone on, I'm fine. It's not stopping me from doing anything, you know, being successful, whatever. Yeah, but some people, it does. And that's where they like to dig into it with some hypnotherapy to try and remember certain things.

Sharon's close encounter is uniquely liminal: it was not a traumatic, intense experience about which she could commiserate with other experiencers who had been on board craft. This liminality, and her seclusion during the experience, makes it a very isolating one, especially compared to Harriet's: Harriet was not only able to commiserate with her friend who had the experience with her, but also with the legacy of other people who had encountered extraterrestrials in a similar manner. Sharon likewise does not draw as much meaning out of her close encounter: it does not exist at the core of her self-concept like it does for Harriet. She recalls being terrified, but unlike the way that Harriet's experience continues to shape her life and selfhood, and vice versa, Sharon describes moving through her experience and continuing her life. She considers it a static event that does not need further investigation.

Inez also mentioned a profound experience relating to UFOs. I interviewed her initially because of her involvement in the Missing 411 subreddit. As we started speaking, much like Don cultivates an interest in the JFK assassination, Inez revealed that she has a general interest in UFOs, in part because of a significant sighting experience that she had. Like Harriet, she also mentions having an earlier UFO sighting as a young girl. Inez's interests are often sparked by personal experiences: “It's usually because I either have something that I've experienced myself that had an effect on me, that I want to see if other people are experiencing.” Inez's research self is in part determined by her own experiences, curiosity about them, and a desire for community and commiseration with people who have had similar

experiences (not unlike Harriet). Echoing Harriet's recounting of her catalyzing extraterrestrial experience, Inez described her sighting experience to me at length. She mentioned offhand that she had other sightings, but she was able to explain them away as satellites or other earthly phenomena. The one she describes in depth was not so easily dismissed, however:

I was with two of my girlfriends, we were in broad daylight, we were up on top of an overlook, on a clear day, we could see as far as the eye could see in every direction. And there were other, you know, moving objects in the sky. So we could see an airport where planes were taking off, with helicopters flying around. This was over the Valley in Los Angeles, right? We were up at Laurel, Laurel Canyon Lookout, overlooking the Valley. And it was on a spring day. So it was crystal clear...Okay, so we can see all the way from the San Bernardino mountains to the ocean. Like, literally, no fog, no smog, it was gorgeous. It'd have been raining for weeks. It was like one of those just really beautiful LA days.

Again recalling Harriet's narrative structure, Inez takes time to set the scene and to paint the day as clear, establishing its normalcy in the process. This normalcy emphasizes the coming strangeness of the sighting, and the clearness of the day highlights her phenomenological and epistemological credibility: there were no visibility problems on the day to cloud her perception of the object. She (along with her friends) was to have a profound encounter between herself and her environment, which would ultimately shift her research self. Continuing, she described the rest of the sighting:

And we'd taken a drive up, like we're up on Mulholland driving around, and we just decided to get out of the car and stop and we were standing there. just admiring the view. And we see this silver disk, this silver—I mean, it really was like, it looked just like out of a little kid's drawing of a UFO like a silver disk...we noticed it, and it's zipping around out there...and at first, we're kind of like, what is that thing? And then it stopped. And it just hovered in the air. And we start watching it more, we're like, are we looking at what we think we're looking at? Like, that's a little silver disk out there, isn't it? Right? Yeah. Okay. And then it starts, it was almost like, once it knew it was being watched, it started to perform for us. It started dancing like it was and it was far away from us...And so it was way out over the center of the Valley and up high in the sky, I mean, up, and it was going up above jets, and circling around them. And then like, zipping past helicopters, it was going from the San Bernardino mountains to the ocean in a second, like almost too fast to be visible. And then it would stop. And it would make a circle. And then it would come closer to us...And we were freaking out. I mean, we were like, Can you believe this?

Inez continued, describing how the people around her and her friends were not responding to their attempts to communicate. As she continued to reflect on her experience, Inez theorized what the explanation could be, suggesting that perhaps she and her friends were simply being ignored by the people around them, and bringing up, but also expressing skepticism, that she and her friends could have

been “in a portal.” She also later mentioned that, like Sharon, she doesn’t often tell this story to people because they quickly dismiss her. Although she named possibilities, Inez refused to theorize about exactly what it was that was behind the sighting, establishing her RS as curious and skeptical.

Inez cultivates a variety of research interests beyond UFOs and Missing 411, and she was the only interviewee to bring up how she was raised as a factor in these interests: “I mean, I grew up in such a sort of counterculture environment, like, you know, hippie parents, which kind of morphed into New Age-ish stuff. I’ve just always been around a lot of people who were into that stuff, not even *into* it, just took it as a given. Like, of course there’s intelligent life out there besides just us, who are we to say there isn’t?...Like, it’s a huge universe. Who am I to say, you know, what’s going on?” She goes on to discuss her UFO beliefs as a teenager (including the notion that there was a fleet of UFOs off the coast of California), which she is now much more skeptical of. Alongside Eddie, who discussed his viewing of science fiction movies as part of his developing interest in UFOs, Inez also discussed her media diet as being instrumental in developing her beliefs:

...I mean, in the ’70s, and ’80s. I mean, that was so formative, like the Bermuda Triangle and all those TV shows and all that stuff. It was like, I mean, all my friends my age, we all grew up with that stuff. Like, we grew up with the paranormal as entertainment, basically. Right? You know, the discovery of UFOs and the sort of, like I said, I think Watergate, like, again, it just sort of turned this little key where people just became less just trustworthy in general of the government, and people were more willing to question things like JFK and UFOs, whatever that place is called, Area 51 or whatever. Because all that—all that information was coming out about like MK Ultra, and, you know, the secret government stuff. And, and I think that’s also, you know, obviously, that’s part of the issue with QAnon too, is, you know, it’s not like our government hasn’t lied to us. It’s not like there isn’t some evidence for it.

Reflecting on her media diet during her formative years, Inez recalled an entertainment and media landscape suffused not only with the paranormal, but also with waning public trust in the government.

Although not a QAnon supporter, she also seems to understand why it has become so prominent.

Although she is a more casual researcher, she is inquisitive and reflexive, constantly questioning herself and considering what has made her think in specific ways, and maintaining a measure of distance between herself and the topic she is interested in.

Jesse Williams is a full-time college student and part-time bladesmith living in the Appalachian region. He grew up in rural Pennsylvania and recounted several odd, paranormal things that happened to him in childhood, including an experience where he heard ghostly music coming from an abandoned farm that was rumored to be haunted. He also told me about a local house known as the “suicide house” in which “...every generation that grows up in this house, the second born son, or the firstborn son, kills himself. I mean, which is terrible, and it's nothing that we should be like, ‘ooh, spooky’ about because like someone is suffering and dying there by his own hand, but one really can't help but be like, what's going on here?” He also recalled that the town he grew up in was home to a renowned cult, as well as a coven of witches:

And they would be out there, like on the lawn in a little circle, like passing around sage and doing stuff like that, not like human sacrifice, but it was like a cool little kind of community thing. And they were a big part of the community too, that we, uh, we like to know, we're kind of kooky, but, uh, [we] give the town a little bit of character. So from my early years, I was always exposed to that kind of like, weird paranormal wooo, hooba booba, kind of all that. And that's why I became interested in Missing 411.

Jesse is unique in his embodied, almost *native* expertise⁵¹⁴: he is an experienced hunter and tracker and knows the wilderness well. Therefore, when he has strange, inexplicable experiences in the woods, he is able to rely on his own expertise to tell him what is normal and what is abnormal, potentially paranormal.

Dr. Felix Jones, who lives on the Eastern seaboard, has a doctoral degree in psychology and now works for a hedge fund. His dissertation work concerned emotions and decision making. When asked about his history with becoming interested in Missing 411, he mentions a book encounter in childhood: “I have always been kind of interested in some of these paranormal-y sorts of things. Um, you know, when I was growing up, I remember being in a library and finding a book on Bigfoot and reading it.” Becoming more interested during his graduate work, he described watching more YouTube videos and listening to more podcasts during that time. Once he heard about Missing 411 through a video, he then “devoured

⁵¹⁴ Stephanie Alice Baker and Chris Rojek, “The Belle Gibson Scandal: The Rise of Lifestyle Gurus as Micro-Celebrities in Low-Trust Societies,” *Journal of Sociology* 56, no. 3 (September 1, 2020): 388–404, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783319846188>.

every interview [with Paulides] I could find. A lot of the *Coast to Coast* ones, um, you know, watched all the different documentaries that I could find that he's done. I haven't read any of the books, mostly just because they're not very accessible.” Although Felix, along with Jess, is what I would call a more casual researcher, he has a unique self-concept when it comes to research. Like Eddie and a couple of the other people I spoke to, Felix considers himself a skeptic:

I consider myself to be much more on the skeptical side of things. But at the same time, I'm willing to listen to any story and try and fit it into a worldview that makes sense. Um, so I'm out there to try and at least learn all of the different things that I can, see how it sort of jives with my ideas, and then at least toy around with the idea that there could be something else that's going on here. And so from there, you know, all these different, Bigfoot ones to lots of dogman stories, is another one, that's sort of an area that I like listening to. You know, I'm still like, I want to believe it's true, but at the same time, it seems so out there that it's hard to really track.

We spoke at length about how Felix often feels he has two research-selves—the RS who is willing to entertain the idea of paranormal phenomena and the RS rooted in his academic work, who is much more skeptical and scientifically minded. The notion of “wanting to believe” was culturally ingrained in Agent Mulder’s *X Files* poster, and yet it carries with it a grain of truth: Felix stated his desire to believe without irony.

The final participant, Jon Billman, is a journalist, author, former wildland firefighter, and teacher with an MFA in creative writing. He is a regular contributor to *Outside* magazine and is the author of *The Cold Vanish: Finding the Missing in America’s Wildlands* (2020). Jon’s research identity is wrapped up in his work as a writer and journalist. It was because of his book—in it, he discusses Missing 411 and David Paulides—that I emailed him to ask if he was willing to be interviewed. At other points in our interview, he discusses his current book project, which is about a shipwreck and tangentially related to UFOs. He described his initial interest in missing 411 and, more broadly, people who go missing in the wilderness:

I think it started when my wife and I were living in southwestern Wyoming. And Amy Bechdel went missing, up in the Wind River range. It was about three hours away, and she was training—she was an elite runner at the University of Wyoming and she graduated and was training for the Olympic marathon trials, and was up in the Wind Rivers. She drove her car up there and parked it to go for a training run. And her husband was a professional rock climber at that time, and he came back from a field outing climbing down in town and Amy just never came home. And this

started a massive search and authorities accused him of being involved in her disappearance. And, you know, Wyoming is...a massive state geographically but there are less than half a million people in the whole state...the local news is the statewide news. And so I just remember being rapt by that case. And you know, listening to NPR in the morning and reading the *Casper Star-Tribune* about it, and just being very curious about it....And so I pitched an update on that story to *Runner's World*. And they and they assigned it to me. And so I went out there to sort of, to hang out with the husband, Steve Bechdel, and just to see, and the sheriff and all the investigators, and just to see what had transpired since then. And um, you know, it looks, it looks very much like a serial killer's involved. They've got a guy on death row and one in Wyoming, Dale Wayne Eaton, who I mean, a lot of clues point towards him being involved in her disappearance, but they haven't found her yet. So that's the case that really started it off for me, I think.

Like so many other participants, Jon was drawn into his area of research by a compelling story, an intriguing mystery. What makes this mystery unique among others is that part of what pulled Jon to the story was its local nature: it happened close to him. More than any other topic, locality is a significant factor for Missing 411.

Research selves are frequently established in experiences with the topic that take place in early life, whether through one's own personal encounter with something inexplicable or an encounter with a book about the subject. Missing 411 is at once place-based and local, and predicated on the research of a single person: David Paulides. To cultivate expertise on the topic—and I do not believe any of the Missing 411 interviewees would consider themselves experts—one would need to be deeply familiar with *his* extensive research, rather than one's own work. Missing 411 participants expressed epistemic practices and research identities that were rooted in embodied knowledge (Jesse), a unique mix of research-as-entertainment and researcher reflexivity (Inez and Felix), and journalistic investigation and storytelling (Jon). All of the participants, except Jon, related Missing 411 to something mysterious that happened to them in the wilderness, using the theory as a possible explanatory framework for their own inexplicable experiences. Such inexplicable experiences recall the personal, significant encounters recounted by experiencer-UFO-researchers like Harriet (and to some degree Sharon and Inez)—but these encounters with the inexplicable are the opposite of localized, hailing as they do from the depths of space and consciousness. UFO researchers seem to be split along gender and geographic lines, with Sharon and Harriet valuing their own and others' personal experiences (through interviews with other experiencers),

and Mark and Eddie approaching research and defining their research identities according to more scientific, empirical, second-hand approaches. Don is somewhere in between: valuing fieldwork above all else but not drawing on his own experiences for his research. Steve and Jon are similar in their identities as writers and their concomitant interest in storytelling, and Cyril and Bill both connect their research-selves with speaking back to power. Many parallels exist within how these researchers approach both their methods and themselves when it comes to research, across disciplines and topics. Even my small sample size contains a plethora of research identities and methods.

II. Dimension 3: Methods and Methodologies

Participants used many different kinds of research methods in the course of their research, some of which blend together or overlap, including interviewing, anthropological fieldwork, auto-ethnography, survey research, archival research, experiments, and online searches. Some participants specialized in a single method, and others were familiar with several different methods. This section is divided into subsections, which summarize a given method and the participants who use it.

Interviewing

Interviewing is by far the most common research method used by interviewees, with Harriet, Sharon, Don, Mark, and Jon all mentioning having used it at some point in their research. For UFO researchers like Harriet, Sharon, Don, and Mark, interviewing makes sense as a method: it is a simple and straightforward way to gather information from people who have direct experience with the phenomenon as a witness—having had a close encounter of any kind (from the first kind, a sighting, to the fourth kind, being on board a craft).⁵¹⁵ Harriet and Sharon take a slightly different approach than Mark and Don—I

⁵¹⁵ J. Allen Hynek, *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Study* (Kindle Edition, 2019).

will first summarize Sharon's approach to interviewing, then Harriet's, and then Mark's, Don's, and Jon's.

Sharon described the entire process of conducting an interview with a witness:

Well, we get, we usually get their details over the phone first, and then we decide whether we think it's worthwhile, to, on some occasions, take time out from work. But try and do it in our spare time and go out and talk to people, some of them could be a fair distance, you know. And so—and we'll spend time with them. So we'll record them, of course asking for their permission, and then we get them to tell their story. And their story is usually all over the place. So then we have to go back to the beginning and fill in the holes on what you know, that sort of thing. But usually on the phone, we give them, I give them a free rein to just—because they just want to tell someone this story first. Just get it out and then go back and fill in those gaps. And we go out and we get, you know, we ask more questions that will hopefully prompt them to think about—to report on other things...

Here, Sharon outlines the steps that must take place in order to interview a witness: speaking with them on the phone, traveling to their location, interviewing them (and recording the interview), and clarifying unclear parts of the story. Depending on the closeness of the encounter, she also has witnesses sketch out spacecrafts or figures that they may have seen. She also discussed the importance of not leading the interviewee, as well as the importance of interviewing in pairs: “Well, for example, you know, you have your own thoughts about [the witness's encounter], but you don't want to lead them. So, and often, those things don't get discussed until after with the colleague that we've gone out with, because we always go out and twos. And then we'll go well, that person said this, and, you know, what do you think about that? Do you think we should, you know, get back to them and talk more about that once they've had a chance to sort of settle down after the interview and that sort of thing...” Consulting with a colleague is a guiding factor in shaping future interviews.

Harriet approached interviewing witnesses in a similar way:

Well...usually, people who have sightings want, usually, want confidentiality of their name and details, but not always. But almost always experiencers want total confidentiality. So usually, someone will contact me via social media or whatever, email, phone, ... and they'll tell me that they've had some experiences, and they want to discuss it with me. And at that point, it's usually quite difficult to get much out of them, they just want to tell you a little tiny, minimal piece and see your reaction. That's what I usually find. And so sometimes, they'll want to talk on the phone, and they'll just go all over the place, you know, they'll be here one minute, and they'll be twenty years back in another, and they'll be a piece here and a piece there, and, they're trying to get it, get it all out. And they're nervous. Usually people's voices are shaking. And so what I tend to do is just have—try to keep that brief, a brief talk with them and say, “Look, it might be best if you put

your thoughts into writing.” And sometimes people go, “Oh, I’m no good at that,” And other times, but generally, they will say “yes, that’s a good idea.” And I say, “Take your time. There’s no rush, you know, you’ve sat on this a long time. There’s no rush. It’s just between us.” And I give them all the usual confidentiality assurances.

Harriet faces the same problem that Sharon does when interviewing: witnesses usually tell their stories in a non-chronological way, sometimes worsened by an intense emotional state. Rather than doing a traditional recorded interview and asking clarifying questions, as Sharon did, Harriet prefers to have witnesses write out their experiences. Harriet also mentioned the importance of confidentiality, emphasizing that it is often especially important for experiencers to have their identities kept confidential. Don also spoke about this, highlighting the fact that building a trusting relationship with witnesses is required in order to obtain useful information from them: “you shouldn’t expect witnesses to volunteer information without much confidence being built between the two and a comfort level where they respected—there was a mutual respect, and there was a mutual understanding of confidentiality.” After the initial writing stage, Harriet continues to be in touch with her interviewees to iteratively create an accurate document:

At that point, I read [what the interviewee has written] and I get back to them and say, Okay, I’ve got a few questions, I’d like to ask you to clarify some things or whatever. So we do a bit of clarification, so that I can then adjust the word document or make notes or whatever, of my own. And then we set up a time to either talk again on the phone, or we talk on Skype or Zoom. And, because they’ve already done a bit of communicating with me, and they’ve written lots, and they’ve loosened up, that next talk to them face to face on Skype, or Zoom, or on the phone, depending where they are, is really important. And, and you usually find when you start asking certain things, or offering some corroborative evidence to some of the things they may have talked about, then we start to get into their feelings, how it’s affected their life, because usually that’s not included in there, it’s usually just a description of what they can recall. So when you’re feeling more relaxed, we get into the feelings, and where they want this to go, what they want to do with it, where they would like to go next, how it’s affected their life, whether they have concerns about their children, or other people who may have been involved in the contacts. And, and so they’ll usually talk to me and go away, think about that, and then sometimes come back with additional information they forgot. So I say, “Okay, take your Word document and insert it and give me the new word document, So we’re all up to date, let’s just take our time till we get this right.”

Harriet illustrates here how she works closely with interviewees in order to create a document that reflects their experiences accurately. Creating such a document solidifies the contact experience into a record that

can be referenced and put into context with other records, creating an archive of UFO contact experiences stewarded by Harriet and her research group.

Don and Sharon both discussed feelings of being beholden to interviewees, responsible for them, seeming to consider themselves advocates to some degree. Not only does Sharon feel responsible for recording her interviewee's stories, but she also feels responsible for publicizing them. She also spoke about the initial interview with a witness being a kind of "psychological first aid:"

So you've got to sort of help them integrate. It's a bit like an initiation process, really, you know, they're initiated into something else. And I, that's how I see it. And so they, you know, it's the whole loss, the grief. Yeah, and then the anger, "why isn't the government doing something about this?" Or "why did it happen to me?" Or those sorts of things, then, you know, they can sort of get angry again, and then they'll just have to over time, integrate the whole process. So it's basically you're helping...you're doing that psychological first aid, I guess, at the initial interview. And saying things like, "well, you're not the only person that this happened to, you're not alone. We know about these things." So that they don't feel so isolated, you know. And if they're having a negative experience, "well you're still here, you're still alive. You know, everything's okay. Your children are fine. You know, it's been frightening. We understand that. But you're still alive." So there's all that all that stuff...I guess, try to normalize a strange experience as best you can, in a way that leaves them feeling less isolated, and that there's someone else that they can talk to who won't judge them.

At another point in the interview, Sharon compares herself directly to a therapist. She approaches her interviews with great care, always putting the experience and the psychological well being of the interviewee at the forefront of the interaction.

Similarly to Sharon, Don often spoke of interviewees as people who need to be believed and respected:

One of the [Roswell] witnesses said to me, "Don, it's the first thing I think about in the morning when I get up as the last thing I think about when I go to bed." Again, that's how profound. Like watching a president being assassinated. "I'm up—I'm on the grassy knoll! I saw it!" These people were at Roswell, they were out at the crash site. They were at the base, the military base, they read the newspaper. They would, the radio stations would know, you know, the bulletins were coming in. That type of thing. They lived it. They experienced it. And how dare the skeptics? How dare anyone say, well, "You're old. You're senile. Your memories are fading. You can't..." No, no, no, no...Because again, it's a profound event and such things are not forgotten. They become even clearer and sharper as we get older. That's the wonderful thing about investigation.

In such a way, Don positions himself as defender of the Roswell witnesses against people who do not believe them, the “skeptics.” For Don, by doubting their memories and their stories, skeptics are showing the witnesses to Roswell a lack of respect.

Over the course of his decades of UFO research, Mark interviewed hundreds of UFO witnesses. In the 1990s, as part of a team, he conducted a study on abductees involving a variety of methods: archival research, survey methods, and interviewing. Mark was judicious about how he recruited interviewees: his interviewees had to fit with his study’s particular definition of abduction, as well as be able to speak about their abduction experience without becoming too emotional. Screening interviewees involved “...need[ing] to verify that what they experienced was what we called an abduction, learn generally what they had experienced, you know, when was the first time they thought they had something and you know, how often do they think something happened, you know, things like that.” Whereas Harriet and Sharon are very interested in the emotional experiences of the interviewee, Mark, for this study at least, was much more interested in learning the facts of the abduction, rather than dredging up feelings that the interviewee had experienced. Jon is similarly interested in pursuing the facts, as he has a background in journalism. He described trying to find the best source in a specific locality: “I like to start with people who—you can save yourself a lot of time by just going straight to the source of people who know a lot, and so often it's a [small town] newspaper.”

Participants approached interviewing from a variety of standpoints: Mark and Jon prioritized the data to be gleaned from the interview, Sharon and Harriet prioritized the emotions that come up for interviewees. Don was somewhere in the middle. As I will explain further in Section IV of this chapter, this maps onto the epistemic outlooks of each interviewee: Mark and Jon are distinctly empirical, Don is empirical-experiential, and Sharon and Harriet are markedly experiential in their outlook. Dimension 5, identity, also comes into play here: approaches to interviewing specifically fall along gendered lines. The women I spoke with approached the topic with more care than men seemed to. It is also of note that Sharon and Harriet had careers rooted in care work: Sharon was a housewife at least for a time, as well as a hypnotherapist, and Harriet was a schoolteacher. There is inherent value to approaching interviewing

from a space of care, rather than exclusively with data collection in mind: In her writings on feminist approaches to interview research, Shulamit Reinharz discusses the notion of *believing the interviewee* in the way that Harriet and Sharon do: “‘Believing the interviewee’ is a controversial idea because social interaction typically involves a certain amount of deception and because science relies on skepticism. Some feminist researchers reinterpret the notion of believing the interviewee as a utilitarian and decidedly feminist approach. Specifically, a believed interviewee is likely to trust the interviewer and thus likely to disclose ‘the truth.’”⁵¹⁶ Making their interviewee’s emotional comfort a prime concern may actually be beneficial to data collection in the long run.

Fieldwork

Although other researchers took an ethnographic or archaeological approach, Don was the participant who displayed the most thorough attachment to the notion of “fieldwork.” He spoke repeatedly how highly J. Allen Hynek (his mentor) valued fieldwork, implying that it is the most effective method, particularly when compared to archival research. But what exactly is fieldwork? “In the research community generally, fieldwork refers to primary research that transpires ‘in the field’—that is, outside the controlled settings of the library or laboratory.”⁵¹⁷ For Don, this means both archaeology of the Roswell crash site and interviews with direct witnesses of the Roswell incident or their family members. He discussed the importance of avoiding leading questions, and observing the interviewee’s environment:

You know, you look around, you investigate their house, the room you're sitting in. And if you see a whole bookshelf of UFO books, well, maybe they're a little contaminated. And then, if you feel that you're going to need to do some follow-up research, you'll ask them, "now don't talk to anybody. Don't discuss this with your family, or anyone else. I want to pick up where we left off, when I see you next time. In other words, don't feed, as far as your memories, with outside influences." So you try to keep it as pristine as possible. It's very difficult. But when you do have, as we would call a virgin witness, you try to keep them as untainted as possible. That the only one that they're talking with is you.

⁵¹⁶ Shulamit Reinharz, “Feminist Interview Methods.”

⁵¹⁷ George J. McCall, “The Fieldwork Tradition,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Fieldwork*, ed. Dick Hobbs and Richard Wright (London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848608085>.

Here, Don describes making a thorough effort to ensure that the witnesses are not biased or influenced, either by him or by their own reading. This notion of a virgin or pristine witness, untainted by outside influences, can only be true to some degree. It recalls early anthropological studies that prioritized “uncontacted” or “pristine” tribes, that had yet to be explored by white, Western, colonial anthropologists:

From the beginning, issues concerning the social role of the participant observer centered on the researcher’s cultural standing, on the antinomy of “insider” versus “outsider”...typically, fieldworkers had to enter from outside, to take up life among the natives in order to develop a cultural understanding...The researcher’s perspective on native society could easily range from that of an ordinary member (later termed the “emic” perspective), to that of a complete stranger (later termed an “etic” perspective). The great risk of holding tightly to the member perspective is that of “going native,” and retaining a strict stranger perspective is that of “ethnocentrism.”⁵¹⁸

This etic/emic dichotomy, however, established objectivity in terms of the white, Western, “academic” point of view, linking subjectivity with perspectives from indigenous cultures.⁵¹⁹ Don is conducting what might be considered a longitudinal case study; while the fact that he is not studying indigenous or other nonwhite cultures frees him from some of the colonial legacy of anthropology, any notion of a pristine or uncontacted witnesses recalls this legacy of colonialism that constitutes the foundation of the methodology of fieldwork.

Continuing, Don suggested that fieldwork, despite being, by definition, external to controlled environments, allows for control of the data:

And so you control much of your own research material that way, because if you feel, if you only, if you also treat a witness like, well, this is the one and only opportunity, so I better get it all today, that’s also a faulty approach to an investigation, because the more you talk to other people, from other perspectives, they’re going to provide you a new line of questioning for previous witnesses. So you go back to someone you spoke to a week ago, a month ago, five years ago, because your investigation, as much as you might be diverted, distracted at times, but it should also be circular. Not linear, no investigation is a straight line, but you want the circles as you go off, to always go—move forward [makes spiraling motion]. That you’re always still moving progressively towards an end result because if you’re doing nothing but this [makes circle motion] you’re just spinning your wheels obviously.

While Don initially states here that ensuring the witness stays “pristine” allows him to control his research to some degree, he ultimately concludes that it is not possible to fully exert control over this kind of

⁵¹⁸ McCall, “The Fieldwork Tradition,” 7.

⁵¹⁹ Peter Pels, “Anthropology Should Never Be Fully Decolonized...,” *Etnofoor* 30, no. 2 (2018): 71–76.

longitudinal study. Indeed, being in the field requires an open mind, because “...for a human to study humans *in situ* is to venture onto the latter’s turf, a territory they control numerically so that their ways dominate there.”⁵²⁰ In fact, Don touches on this, and on the iterative nature of his research: he comes back to interviewees after obtaining information from other sources, developing his theory over time.

The notion of the anthropological witness is also important to explore in this context. Chua (2021) discusses the figure of the anthropologist as central to the notion of witnessing, introducing the “...‘ennobling view’ of witnessing that revolves around the figure of the anthropologist as a dedicated but not dispassionate documenter: the *eyewitness* who sees, and who must then *bear witness* to what she has seen through various testimonial forms. Pivoting on this duality of witnessing, such approaches ‘establish the centrality of the anthropologist,’ foregrounding her capacity and authority to speak for, or at least about, others.”⁵²¹ Indeed, Sharon discussed at length her need to both record and disseminate the stories of her witnesses, and her feeling of being responsible for and to them:

If you're doing face-to-face research through a face-to-face interview, gathering the data, basically, first of all, I have to withhold my judgment. Number one, forget about how people look, how they speak, whatever, just withhold that, and I'm going to make room in my mind to be able to put what they're saying in there as objectively as I can. So there's, there's a withholding...And as I, as we're talking, there's a sense of something growing within, you know, it's like you become, and you're gathering and gathering and gathering...So there's almost a feeling of being an advocate for them. Yeah, that grows within me, I feel a real responsibility for their story. And to get it as accurately as possible, gather as accurately as possible. Because sometimes I've had people call and they'll say they're sick, they know they're going to die. And so I have to tell someone this before I die. So that's a real sense of responsibility to make sure that that is recorded for them somehow, and spoken about, as well...

In this quotation, Sharon describes a withholding of her own emotions during the interview, as she’s gathering the witness’s story, a feeling of “gathering” both of the witness’s story and of her own emotions, and the post-interview sense of responsibility she has to the witness, to be a conduit for their story, to publicize and ultimately *bear witness* the outside world. While Sharon never mentions fieldwork by name as Don does, she enacts it in her style of interviewing. In the above quote, Sharon recounts a

⁵²⁰ McCall, “The Fieldwork Tradition,” 3.

⁵²¹ Liana Chua, “Witnessing the Unseen: Extinction, Spirits, and Anthropological Responsibility,” *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 39, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 111–29, <https://doi.org/10.3167/cja.2021.390108>.

desire to remain objective by withholding judgment, at the same time that she feels a pull to advocate for her interviewees. McCall mentions this as an aspect of participant observation: “The fieldworker’s participation in many native activities is a direct source of knowledge about the subjective aspects, while simultaneous observation of those activities is a source of knowledge about their objective aspects; hence, the ‘double consciousness’ that is distinctive of participant observers.”⁵²² Rather than *double consciousness*, which has a different meaning with roots in Black scholarship, I would argue that a better term for this kind of participant observation duality comes from scholarship on literature: Luhmann, in discussing literary criticism, uses the notion of *detached credulity*: “New theorists of narrative fiction—Joshua Landy, Blakey Vermeule, Zsanna Sunshine—argue that the cognitive effect of literature is to train audience in a capacity for what Landy (2012: 76) calls ‘detached credulity,’ a capacity for simultaneous belief in and skepticism of, a capacity to hold parallel commitments that he says is at the heart of enchantment and of the change that literature creates for those who engage with it.”⁵²³ While we are not dealing in narrative fiction, we *are* dealing with stories and mysteries. Detached credulity may be one way for researchers to exist in a space that is both skeptical and faithful; a kind of wanting to believe or believing in spite of themselves. Belief derives from interactions with interviewees, and skepticism from trying to remain objective. Similarly, Chua asks: “...how does the unseen become apprehensible, knowable and actable upon?...[It] involves a movement between what John Durham Peters calls the ‘two faces’ of witnessing: ‘the passive one of seeing [or, I would add, sensing], and the active one of saying [or doing].’”⁵²⁴ Sharon recounted moving between these two phases with remarkable accuracy, illustrating that she is herself enacting a kind of traditional anthropological or ethnographic praxis. Sharon’s epistemic approach (dimension 6) can be considered experiential-empirical: she is concerned with the experiences and emotions of her interviewees at the same time that she tries to be objective. Sharon illustrates that the categories in dimension 6 do not map neatly onto positivism versus interpretivism.

⁵²² McCall, “The Fieldwork Tradition,” 7.

⁵²³ T. M. Luhmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (New Haven, CT: Princeton University Press, 2020), 28.

⁵²⁴ “Witnessing the Unseen: Extinction, Spirits, and Anthropological Responsibility,” 122.

Don also passionately advocated for his interviewees, at times defending them, while continuing to champion fieldwork as a method: "...you have to be in the field to be on solid ground, to be anchored with a great foundation. And as a result, I—that's why I can honestly say I defy anyone. Nobody can match us—best us—in a debate on Roswell because you haven't walked the walk. You haven't talked to the witnesses. You haven't been there. You haven't been to the scene of the crime. So, please. Opinions come a dime a dozen, which is next to nothing." Don becomes defensive not only of the Roswell witnesses in this quote, but also of his own work and expertise on Roswell. For Don, skeptics, by calling into question witnesses' experiences, are disrespecting their personhood and by extension his own. Through complicating the witnessing activities of the anthropologist, Chua explores what it means to witness ineffable phenomena. She also discusses the notion that witnessing, by both the anthropologist and the witness, is highly relational: "By examining the technologies through which...[ineffable phenomena] become witness-able—able to elicit particular actions and responses—I show how witnessing is not reducible to 'seeing,' but can be understood as an indelibly relational process with different forms and effects."⁵²⁵ In the case of ufology, *fieldwork* is one "technology" through which extraterrestrials become witness-able. In order to facilitate a witnessing of the extraterrestrial, fieldwork is de-professionalized and de-contextualized, reduced to face-to-face interviewing and place-based witnessing of physical changes in the environment in which an extraterrestrial encounter took place.

Don and Harriet both addressed the importance of place. I asked Harriet if she and her team ever visited the place in which someone had an experience or a sighting. She replied:

It depends on the caliber of the sighting. I mean, 99% of the sightings are, 'I saw this unusual light in the sky.' But every now and again, you get the really juicy one that's got a lot of detail. For example, a neuroscientist in [city] reported to us a sighting and contact he had had with a craft coming down, and two entities on a beach near him, at night, when he was fishing. So we traveled, you know, it was a five-hour drive...to interview him. And he took us to the beach, he took us to all of the spots. And being a scientist, he was able to describe in minute detail what he had observed and experienced. So if there's a lot of data in it, and, and a specific thing has happened at a specific place, we will definitely go there.

Similarly, Don described going to certain areas where a landing had been reported:

⁵²⁵ Chua "Witnessing the Unseen: Extinction, Spirits, and Anthropological Responsibility," 113.

So we've had swirled areas of grass, depressions in the ground, broken tree branches...And that's where you can take something into a lab. Photographs can wait, video can wait, but something that has interacted with the immediate environment—we want to get there as soon as possible...we may not even talk to the witness except to get some preliminary details as to what you saw, and where did you see it? And if they happen to be at the very location when they saw it touchdown, so to speak. So that would be the one area that we would put everything else behind and get to the location as soon as possible.

Don, more empirical in his approach than Harriet, opined that he would drop everything—including witness testimony—if physical evidence might be available. Harriet, on the other hand, had the neuroscientist witness guide her through the possible landing site, illustrating her experiential approach. Like Harriet, though, Don also described taking Roswell witnesses back to the crash site and other areas of the Roswell Army Air Field in order to trigger their memories of the incident. Place matters to ufologists insofar as it links them to placeless extraterrestrials, giving investigators something physical and tangible to investigate.

Although not specifically a UFO crash, Jon mentioned his intention to include a kind of archaeological fieldwork in his upcoming book: “I've got some GPS coordinates, I'm going to look for some, I'm going to go look in some places where they found some wreckage parts, some some debris from some of these, these antique crashes and talk to talk to some of the few people that live [close to the crash sites].” Crashes of any kind make a compelling site for archaeological tools and methods.

Both Don and Mark were involved in an archaeological survey of the Roswell crash site that took place in 1989. They both described the process to me. Mark kept his description succinct:

I fortunately knew two archaeologists in the Chicago area who were interested in UFOs. Quietly, you know, right? And we put together a small team of people and went [to Roswell] and spent three days on the site in September of '89. Using standard archaeological techniques, looking for any debris from the UFO or anything left by the military. Sadly, except for a couple of buttons that might have been for military clothing, we didn't find anything at the time. But we did a serious research trip.

Don described the trip in greater detail, mentioning working with Mark: “We had archaeologists from Argon Laboratories, our [CUFOS'] Scientific Director, Dr. Mark Rodeghier, who had taken over after Hynek had passed away, and we had a team of other volunteers to do a lot of the spade, a lot of the grunt work, so to speak.” They assembled a task force of sorts, with experts from a variety of fields. Don went

on to describe the archaeological methods used: "...we set up a theodolite, a survey meter, at the upper pinnacle that we mapped out the sites. We laid out a systematic grid. We marked areas of potential entrapment. We flagged—all in preparation for coming back for a full-scale project. And we wanted a university to sponsor it." A theodolite is an archaeological tool often used in landscape archaeology as a means of mapping, surveying, and determining heights. Often an initial step in the process of performing an archaeological dig, surveying generates a high-level map of an area, so that archaeologists can decide which area to excavate through assessing any remains that exist above the ground.⁵²⁶ The Roswell team was not able to advance past the surveying stage at this point due to lack of funds. Several years later, they were finally able to carry out a full-scale archaeological dig:

Six years later, we approached the Contract Archeology Department at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque...And much to our surprise, they were anxious, they were excited by being part of such a project. And it only then came down to, well, we're going to need funding. We're going to need sponsors. Uh, the budget as they put it together for us was about \$40,000 to go in for a four-day dig. And we realized it was gonna take us some time, but to gather the \$40,000—we weren't going to get a grant from the government, that type of thing. And the University, uh, just with the taboo title of a UFO project, we realized that this was going to be extremely difficult.

The University of New Mexico's Office of Contract Archeology, as it is currently known, takes on surveying, mapping, and digging projects from a variety of clients in both the private and public sector. Their website states that, as Don indicated, they do not fund these projects themselves; rather, they offer professional support, expertise, and services for a fee. The dig was once again postponed due to financial hardship. Several years later, Don recalled:

So I get a phone call in May of 2002 from the head of programming at the SciFi channel, Larry Landsman...So he calls up and he says, Don, if you could take the Roswell investigation to another level, what would you do? Well, I immediately said, another archeological dig with the University. His wheels started turning immediately because he saw a wonderful outdoor action field documentary of not just talking heads, and not just people being interviewed, but actual—a TV episode where we had people working out in the field...[six months later] we were out in the field conducting the dig. Full team. We had a helicopter doing aerial photography. We had a back cooperater that was trenching at the very location that the witnesses described a gouge where something gets skipped across the ground for hundreds of feet, ten-foot wide. And we confirmed the gouge. We confirmed it was right below the surface, it was a symmetrical "V." I'll never forget Dr. Dolman just jumping up and down, he was elated that there it was, exactly as the

⁵²⁶ Philip Howard, *Archaeological Surveying and Mapping*, (Routledge, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203417515>.

witnesses [described]—and weather balloons don't create a hundred foot gouges, ten-foot wide, you know, in stone and shale, you know, field stone and lime deposits and that type of thing. And then the program aired in November. Two-hour, prime-time special. It was their highest rated show or their ten year history.

The Roswell dig was only able to happen with funding from a television studio. Funding from traditional institutions was not obtainable for such a project because of the stigma associated with UFO research. Funding an archaeological dig through a television studio may reinforce the perceived *unseriousness* of ufology, though it was the only way the dig could be carried out.

The kind of fieldwork described by Don could be considered a type of public archaeology. *Public* archaeology may refer to public-as-institution, associated with museums and universities, or public-as-the-people, which is related to movements, activists, and political groups. For Guttormsen, “When used synonymously with ‘the people’ as a unifying concept the word ‘public’ will be associated with groups of individuals who debate issues and consume cultural products, and whose reactions inform public opinion, often seen as a critical body external to the state.”⁵²⁷ This maps on exactly to ufologists, who routinely criticize the government’s reaction, or seeming lack thereof, to UFOs. Guttormsen also points out that “Public archaeology associates with other terminologies that refer to public involvement such as in community-led, popular, alternative and commercial interpretations and uses of archaeology.”⁵²⁸

Moshenska expands upon the notion of “alternative archaeologies,” which he defines as

..the practices, products and views of the ancient world that exist beyond the margins of the professional, scholarly and intellectual mainstreams – outsider knowledge of the past, some of it the result of painstaking if misguided scholarship, some of it ‘truths’ revealed to initiates by prophets and conmen and the voices in their heads. Alternative archaeologies pose hypotheses and narratives of the human past that deviate from the mainstream consensus in a variety of ways.⁵²⁹

Indeed, the only aspect of this definition that does not entirely map onto the dig at Roswell is the notion of *ancient* remains. Moshenska writes about extraterrestrial contact as an area of alternative archaeology,

⁵²⁷ Torgrim Sneve Guttormsen and Lotte Hedeager, “Introduction: Interactions of Archaeology and the Public,” *World Archaeology* 47, no. 2 (March 15, 2015): 189–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2015.1027483>.

⁵²⁸ Guttormsen and Hedeager, “Introduction.”

⁵²⁹ Gabriel Moshenska, “Alternative Archaeologies,” in *Key Concepts in Public Archaeology* (UCL Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1vxm8r7>.

but does not mention Roswell, instead discussing the phenomenon of *ancient aliens* (a racist construction associated with the new age that presumes ancient indigenous societies were not capable of producing technologies without extraterrestrial intervention).

The tension that exists within public archaeology between established institutions and counter-establishment groups is reminiscent of ufological approaches as a whole. King describes archaeology of the recent past, sometimes known as historical archaeology, as not wholly different in process when compared to prehistoric archaeology; however: “Historical and sometimes oral-historical research are critical to [historical archaeological sites’] identification and evaluation. They are often expressed largely on or near the surface of the ground, requiring or making possible the application of special excavation methods.”⁵³⁰ For Don, it makes a great deal of sense to apply archaeological methods to the recent past of the Roswell crash site: “...colleagues, other investigators, scientific review boards, told me for months, ‘you’ll never be able to investigate something that happened that many years ago.’ Well, first of all, what’s anthropology? What’s archeology? You’re investigating things that happened a million years ago, hundreds of thousands, tens of thousands. Roswell...was only forty years ago.” In fact, King cites the 2002 dig described by Don as an example of one type of archaeology of the recent past (forensic archaeology).⁵³¹ The PI of the Roswell dig, William Doleman, published a paper that confirms Don’s version of events. Don and his writing partner served as technical advisors to the project. Doleman’s 2009 article describes the different archaeological methods used in detail, including aerial photographs, electromagnetic conductivity surveys, high-resolution metal detection surveys, archaeological excavation activities, backhoe trenching, and soil stratigraphy.

Don recalled two further archaeological digs that he was involved with at the Roswell crash site. The first, in 2006, was also sponsored by a television program. Don found that dig to be less detailed and

⁵³⁰ Thomas F. King, “Archaeology of the Recent Past,” in *A Companion to Cultural Resource Management*, Blackwell Companions to Anthropology 17 (Chichester, West Sussex, UK ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

⁵³¹ William Doleman, “Putative Roswell UFO Crash Site: A Case Study,” in *Handbook of Space Engineering, Archaeology, and Heritage*, ed. Ann Darrin and Beth L. O’Leary (Milton Park, Abingdon-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, England, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 38, <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781420084320>.

involved, and “more of a reality show...we got some work done, but it was a disappointment.” He further recounted digs that took place in 2013, and then in 2016. Don did not discuss how the 2013 and 2016 digs were financed, but he did describe the process and the findings from these digs:

And then in 2013, we had another archeological dig, the fourth, where we went in without the University, but we had two investigators, two archeologists, from the Bureau of Land Management, BLM. We had a geologist who teaches at the Military Institute in Roswell, professor Frank Kimbler. And we worked predominantly in setting up a grid and then using metal detectors. And we found a number of fragments, a number of metal fragments, that when tested, they are predominantly aluminum, but they have a hardening alloy by the name of the molybdenum, which is strictly a hardening agent for steel. Not aluminum. Because with aluminum, it makes it as brittle as glass. So it's used and it's registered strictly for the use of, with steel. But there it is. 3 percent. It doesn't sound like a lot, but it is a lot, when it comes to metal alloys. And we have numerous pieces that all have molybdenum in them.

Here, Don once again describes the team involved in the process of the dig, featuring two government and one institutional representative. These representatives lend methodological expertise and legitimacy to the project. In the above quotation, Don recounted the findings of the dig in technical language, explaining their strangeness, but shying away from discussing the implications of finding such alloys. He continued:

In 2016, the last dig, we worked downsite, we determined an area of a final depository of the erosion and the runoff from the site and—about ten inches of sediments at that location alone. And we spent three days working with metal detection. We didn't find so much as a nail, so much as a piece of wire, wire fence, so now we have to retrace. We'll move now, this was about a mile from the actual debris field. Now we retrace, we move back. And we start finding runoff that would demonstrate that that's the actual cutoff, a runoff site, a depository site, with the hope that we'll find something...we've done infrared, and the area is scorched. According to the satellite infrared imagery, the site itself is scorched. And to us that demonstrates that they didn't burn it. But if you would do your history, how would they have potentially decontaminated the site back in 1947? If they felt that they needed to wash it down, flush it down, what would they have used? Well, they would have brought in fifty-five barrel drums of bleach, and they would have poured bleach over the entire area. And that would have given the impression of it being scorched. Burned. So what the satellite infrared imagery show[s]: the area has been scorched. It's different than the surrounding area. When we had professor Dolman attempt ground sampling of the site, using the outside area as a control, the potassium level of the ground at the debris field is much lower than the immediate surrounding control terrain. That too would suggest bleach, which would reduce and almost eliminate the potassium readings in the area.

Here, Don discusses the technical aspects of the archaeological dig with alacrity, discussing the implications of the research and hypothesizing about how the area was likely doused in bleach. At another point, he also discussed the use of ground-penetrating radar, which demonstrated the existence of a gouge in the ground. Ground-penetrating radar, although it “...has a reputation as one of the more complex

archaeological geophysical methods because it involves the collection of large amounts of reflection data from numerous transects within grids, often producing massive three-dimensional databases,” is very useful in its ability to “...produce high quality three-dimensional images of the subsurface.”⁵³²

Through the years, the archaeological work that Don has been associated with has led him to the following conclusions: “...it all continues to demonstrate that the only thing that ever crashed out there was what—it was exactly what the eyewitnesses described. That this was something that was, was a craft of unknown origin. And it was not a weather balloon. It was not a plane. It was not a rocket. And so once again, the eyewitnesses are telling us the truth. And so another reason that when we conduct the archeological work it's done with the utmost respect. It's done also with the utmost security.” It is evident that Don takes his work quite seriously; it is also evident that he considers witnesses to the Roswell incident to be stakeholders in his research. Not only is this public archaeology project certainly an alternative archaeological project, but it is also a community-based project in that Don considers it merely a confirmation of witness statements he has already procured, rather than the other way around. Don seems to consider himself first and foremost an advocate for the witnesses and for what they and their family members experienced and recounted. As King concluded in his piece on archaeology of the recent past, there are often active communities that have a stake in the research being done: “[physical findings] are sometimes connected with and of special interest to living communities, who ought to be consulted in determining what to do with them.”⁵³³ Don’s particular brand of alternative, public archaeological and anthropological fieldwork centers witnesses at the same time that it prioritizes the physical evidence found at the crash site. This demonstrates Don’s position on the Dimension 6 scale as being empirical-experiential: he values both, and especially how they may work together in the practice of fieldwork.

⁵³² Lawrence B. Conyers, “Introduction to Ground-Penetrating Radar,” in *Ground-Penetrating Radar for Archaeology* (New York, NY: AltaMira Press, 2013), 12–24, <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=61afbd0f-a6d2-4ae5-8872-d2315922f6bc%40redis&vid=0&format=EB>.

⁵³³ Thomas F. King, “Archaeology of the Recent Past,” 91.

Harriet practices a kind of autoethnographic research. Autoethnography can be considered:

...both a research process and the product of the approach. As a research method, it synthesizes ethnography with genres of life writing, especially autobiography, memoir, and personal essay (Manning and Adams, 2015). Autoethnographers engage in “opportunistic research” (Reimer, 1977), which draws from “at hand experiences” so that researchers may construct an account of their own lived experiences as starting points for inquiry. Practitioners represent the thoughts, emotions, collective experiences, and social processes associated with an identity or issue and then contextualize them in broader, societal-level phenomena. As participant observers, autoethnographers are “extreme” insiders (Rambo *et al.*, 2019) with a complete membership role (Adler and Adler, 1987) and deep engagement and immersion in the scene.⁵³⁴

Harriet’s lived experiences of contact with extraterrestrials shapes her research with other experiencers, her position within ufology, and her approach to the wider world. She is certainly an “extreme insider” as a well-known member of the “experiencer” or “communicator” group. She has also published a book, *Double Knowledge*,⁵³⁵ in which she recounts her experiences with extraterrestrials in detail. The way she described her research to me also revealed a kind of autoethnographic approach.

In *Double Knowledge*, Harriet reflects on her experiences with the strange and unusual, including, but not limited to, contact with extraterrestrials. She recounts each incident by titling it, and giving her age at the time the incident took place, e.g. “first ET encounter, age 26 years.” She then organizes these incidents in loosely themed chapters, such as “strange encounters with animals,” “ghosts,” and “threats.” In the “threats” section, she discusses the several points in her life in which she has had near death experiences, concluding the section with this statement: “Over the years I have spoken with other experiencers who have cheated death on a number of occasions through extraordinary, fateful interventions.” Similarly, in our interview, she described feeling a natural affinity when encountering other experiencers: “...I began to talk to people who could actually remember the figures that I was actually seeing, by then, I was actually seeing what is commonly known as the greys, and, and I came across other people who could tell me the same. So it felt like and it still feels like when I talk to people

⁵³⁴ Carol Rambo and Carolyn Ellis, “Autoethnography,” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2020), 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosa082.pub2>.

⁵³⁵ For confidentiality reasons, this is not the true name of the book.

like that...I feel as if I know them, even though I've only just met them.” Spry suggests that autoethnography is “...autoethnography is not about the self at all; perhaps it is instead about a willful embodiment of ‘we.’”⁵³⁶ Putting herself into context with other members of the experiencer community, Harriet illustrates the autoethnographic drive for finding a collective that understands her experience and approach(es).

Harriet recounted a particularly impactful encounter she had with a person she felt an immediate but strange kinship with:

I was speaking in Norway, I arrived in a taxi with another speaker, I saw a guy walking towards me pulling his bag...I said to the speaker next to me, "Oh, look, there's—" and then I didn't know his name. And I felt stupid. And I went right to the window pointing at him. And he looked at the taxi, and he saw me pointing, and he went, [gasps, points] like this, at me, as if he knew me and he went, and he ran towards the taxi and wrenched the door open, I lept out, and we just threw ourselves into each other's arms. And we were both sobbing. And then we just clung to each other for maybe a minute [chuckles], which is a long time. And then we sort of pulled each other apart, and, but he wouldn't let me go and I wouldn't—we moved apart but, and he whispered in my ear, "I don't know you, but I know you. And I love you." And I said, "I don't know you either. But I do know you. And I love you, too. I've grown to love you somewhere." So everyone was sort of looking and we felt a bit stupid by then [laughs]. So we went inside, and he had his wife with him. And we found our rooms and that, and then we talked privately. He was attending because I was speaking, I was going to be speaking about contact, which he had had. And he knew my name, but he had not seen a picture of me, he'd been actually asked to come and do the audio visual at a relatively late point. And he saw that there was someone speaking about contact, and thought, that's going to be great. But talking about his own experiences, we worked out that we'd probably been on board craft since childhood, and had grown to know each other very well. And had formed a bond and a relationship where we keep in constant contact, on a weekly basis, we talk on Skype about twice a month.

This experience was obviously very profound for Harriet, illustrating as it did a mode of connecting with someone who not only understood her contact experiences from a personal perspective but whom she also *knew* in this other, extraterrestrial world that seemed to only come back to both of them in snippets. She tried to describe the very specific kinship and affinity she feels for other experiencers: “It feels as if there is some great huge amount of information and knowledge that we share, but we can't access just at this

⁵³⁶ Tami Spry, “Autoethnography and the Other: Performative Embodiment and a Bid for Utopia,” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018), 627–49.

moment. They feel as if they are connected to me strongly and powerfully in some way.” Without access to this trove of shared knowledge, Harriet must rely on instincts and affects, trusting this feeling of connection she has with other experiencers. This connection between self and community differentiates her book and her work from the autobiographical, bringing it into the realm of autoethnography.

Other aspects of her work also indicate that it can be viewed as autoethnographic. Discussing the shortcomings of some autoethnography—that it focuses on the Other only insofar as the Other reveals greater insight into the Self—Spry proposes an autoethnography that seeks to understand a *we*—the relations between the Self and the Other. Quoting Pensoneau-Conway (2013), Spry suggests that we “find autoethnography fertile ground for social justice projects largely because autoethnography assumes a stance of incompleteness of the self, of the other and of the relationship, thus allowing for intersubjectivity.”⁵³⁷ Where can we locate the Other within Harriet’s work? Is the Extraterrestrial the Other, or is the expanse of non-experiencer humanity the Other? She triangulates between herself and others like her, humanity at large, and extraterrestrials, situating herself as the link between humans and ETs. She states in her book that:

It is through my relationships with alien species that I have come to understand the deeper soul connections we have with each other, and with them. I discovered not only a parallel life or co-reality, but a double knowledge status – the reality that I entered this life with a soul formed of two distinct identities: ‘alien’ and ‘human’. I outline the steps involved in preparing for this life, through a soul enhancement and education process that constitutes the dual soul... This double knowledge is a major revelation in understanding of the nature of life and humanity, and is the key point of this book. Thousands of humans are involved in a joint soul-alien venture to uplift and upgrade humanity through this unique combination of intelligences.

Is this human-alien project to “uplift and upgrade” humanity itself a project of intersubjectivity, including the extraterrestrial as a subjective Other? Could this intersubjectivity be working towards a larger social justice-oriented project, as Spry implies? In the final chapter of her book, Harriet highlights this, as she sketches out human-alien intersubjective futures: “In the world of our future, mankind will need to adopt policies of global cooperation, effective conflict resolution, sharing, and supporting more vulnerable countries.”

⁵³⁷ Spry, “Autoethnography and the Other: Performative Embodiment and a Bid for Utopia,” 639.

For Spry,

...this is what autoethnography is for, to get into and articulate the strange dialogues we have and strange places we inhabit with each other. To go where other methods do not go. To reflexively narrate the pain and joy for the purposes of sociocultural hope, to 'listening,' as Adams and Jones (2011) intuit, 'to and for the silences and stories we can't tell—not fully, not clearly, not yet; returning, again and again, to the river of story accepting what you can never fully, never unquestionably know.' (pp. 111-112).⁵³⁸

Each time Harriet recounts an encounter with an ET or moment of frisson or coincidence indicating the strange or otherworldly, she tackles and concretizes such *strange dialogues*. The notion of developing a *sociocultural hope*, or striving towards a kind of utopian futurism, is also something that she also touches on through her conceptualization of the “Three Waves.” The Three Waves is a “program the aliens first told me about when I was eight years old, involving volunteer [extraterrestrial] souls progressively called to lead lives on our planet to assist mankind at this time of spiritual transition.” This alien program, running throughout the twentieth century into the present day, is designed to bring humans closer to utopia and away from impending social and climate collapse. Harriet continues: “we might assume the [ET] agenda is just about the human race and the physical planet, but it is not. We are part of the bunch, bonded to others, and what affects one sector of the galaxy, affects all, and we cannot be left behind in the expansion and evolution of the universe.” Such a statement further complicates the notion of Spry’s message that we explore and define the autoethnographic *we*: how can an autoethnography whose ontology is itself not of this planet be conceptualized? Certainly, Harriet is going where other humans have not gone.

Dimension 5 (identity) is also important to consider here, as it may have influenced Harriet’s particular brand of autoethnographic research. Not only is she an experiencer and communicator, but she is also a woman and a non-American. All three of these identities often make her feel as though she is on the outside of mainstream ufological discourse, to the point that she does not feel at home within the discipline. Employing an autoethnographic approach allows her not only to emphasize social justice in

⁵³⁸ Spry 635.

her utopian vision for humanity as part of a kind of universal village (rather than a global one), but it also allows her to use her own identities and experiences—particularly as a communicator—to speak back to what she perceives as the entrenched ufological power structures of male, institutionalized, empirical, American ufology.

Archival & Library Research

Although I originally conceived of this project as one in which I only interviewed people who conducted research using libraries and archives, I quickly found that there were many other methods at play in these areas of counter-establishment research, as we have already seen above. Furthermore, marked slippage exists between what is or isn't an archival or library source online—is the newspapers.com repository considered archival? What about the Internet Archive? “For researchers, the web’s value as an immense collection of time’s past outweighs its usefulness as a conduit for current information.”⁵³⁹ Yet, the mythos of Web 1.0, the overwhelming everythingness of the Internet, the supposed permanence of its content, blurs the lines between archive and Internet.

Many participants had conducted research in archives or libraries over the course of their lives, sometimes related to the research area in question and sometimes unrelated. I asked them what their impressions were of libraries and archives, how librarians and archivists could better help researchers like them, and what their experiences had been at libraries and archives in general and at specific repositories. In the course of this discussion, a couple of participants described their own archives, as well as their thoughts on particular archival and LIS values—though they did not use the LIS terminology, it was clear what their thoughts were on the areas of digitization, preservation, access and accessibility, and collection development. My participants displayed well-rounded experience with archives, in that many of them have not only participated as users, but they have also interacted with archives as potential donors, as well as as archivists, in a sense, for their own personal archives or archives of the organizations they head.

⁵³⁹ Don MacLeod, “Archival Research,” *Litigation* 40 (2014 2013): 18.

Harriet described contacting an accessioning archivist at the local archives in her home country in order to see whether or not they would be interested in taking her archive about a prominent UFO researcher.

I took an archive, an historic archive I'd created on a veteran and UFO researcher, who was very well known, was always on TV and radio, and had been around doing this work for forty-four years. And I went to our local library, to the archivist, and said to her, "Would you like this archive of his writing, and his press stuff, and all of the rest of it, you know, conferences, photographs, investigations he'd done, etc.. Would they like it for the library?" And it was like, "Ah, well, if you want, we could put it in a drawer, yeah." And that was, that was the reception I got. And I said, "Well, one day when more is known about the UFO subject—you know, this is a really important piece of UFO history. This person played a role in it for forty-four years in our country. And he comes from this city. And he supported this library." You know, she's going, "Well, if you want to put it together. Okay. Yeah, we'll look at it." So that was disappointing. And I never did bother to take it in. I'll just put it in my own—in [the EERC's] archive and put it online, and digitize it.

The lukewarm response Harriet received from the accessioning archivist can be typical of many archives: they often have to deal with a glut of material, so that even a lukewarm offer of stewardship would be cause for celebration for many donors.⁵⁴⁰ The archive she has compiled is also of lesser value than, say, his personal archives—collections of clippings tend to have less archival value than letters, emails, or personal ephemera. Before Harriet told me this story, she spoke about how the public at large, and as an extension, institutions like archives and libraries, view ufology as "an unproven, fringe subject." This recounting of an unsatisfactory interaction with an accessioning archivist seemed to prove to her that people, especially people in positions of institutional power, dismissed anything relating to UFOs out of hand. Further, Harriet did not feel as though the archivist would provide adequate access to the collection, so she decided to steward and digitize it herself. This parallels, in some ways, being unsatisfied with official explanations and thus taking research into one's own hands: in this circumstance, Harriet takes the archival activities of preservation and access into her own hands, unconvinced that a professional would do a better job.

⁵⁴⁰ I have worked as a consultant for an artist and writer who wanted to donate her archives, and I can personally attest to the difficulty of getting personal archives placed—even those of high value that come from respected local artists.

Similarly, Jon mentioned several times in both interviews that he did not want the archivists he has worked with to know that he has an interest in UFOs, trying to “...come off as being very professional and separated from the UFO fray. And [the archivists], they’re on to me now. Because they, you know, they get other FOIA requests, And they know, yeah, they know what I’m up to.” Jon is anxious about being treated or perceived differently—he doesn’t want to be *just another UFO researcher*, worrying that being perceived as such might mean that archivists put him in a box, so to speak, potentially making research more difficult. Jon and Harriet being ready for ridicule means that they are always prepared for people in positions of authority, including archivists, to dismiss or make fun of them because of their research interests. In order to help them, archivists may have to go above and beyond to illustrate that their research area is being taken seriously, even if that might not be what the archivist themselves thinks about the topic in question.⁵⁴¹

As the leaders of their own UFO research organizations, Harriet, Sharon, and Mark care for their organizations’ archives, stewarding materials like newspaper clippings, microfilm, binders of UFO sighting reports submitted to the organizations, personal files, journals and periodicals put out by the organizations. Harriet also had to contend with a colleague of hers donating his archive to EERC: “I’ve just inherited twelve boxes of important data from a colleague of mine...And, and so this all has to be digitized and integrated into our current archive, and it’s, it’s a massive job. Sometimes I wonder if I’ll get it done in my lifetime.” This kind of overwhelm is familiar for those of us who have done archival work.⁵⁴² Harriet and Sharon frequently discussed the digitization projects they were undertaking. Harriet had digitized some of her archives and planned to make the records available via a public website, but had encountered setbacks to getting the website up and running. As of the time of the interview in early 2021, Harriet had made indexes of collections available online so that researchers and members of the public could email her through the organization, and she would email them the documents they are interested in. Sharon’s organization, UFO Research A—— (UFORA) has some records available online, but most are

⁵⁴¹ Eadon, “(Not) Part of the System.”

⁵⁴² Richard J. Cox, *Archival Anxiety and the Vocational Calling* (Duluth, MN: Litwin Books, 2011).

still only available in physical formats. In addition to the archival materials she houses, Sharon also has the 2000+-book UFORA library in her house. For Mark's work with CUFOS, there is "...an internal website where we have uploaded many, many, many types of documents of all types, you know, case reports, articles, and what have you." He also has his own personal archives, which are separate from those at CUFOS.

Many participants were also, of course, users of libraries and archives. Some, like Jesse and Felix, did not use libraries and archives much because they live in more rural areas that do not have them. Harriet, Sharon, Felix, and Mark all remarked on using libraries less nowadays than they used to. For Harriet, this was because "everything I need is online now," reasoning that Mark echoed: "And a lot of that stuff is available now online—years ago, it wasn't as much. But you know, there are newspaper archives online now, extensive ones. And so the—I think that there's less interaction with archivists these days." Eddie expressed amazement at the amount of data available online: "And much that I can do online now is something—I've seen some things that I never saw before." Being able to conduct research without having to leave their homes, particularly in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, was paramount for these researchers.

Jon's current book project necessitated him going to archives more frequently than he ever has before, seeking help from archivists and getting to know them as a researcher. Harriet describes having done research in private and public archives, pointing out the difficulty of accessing some public records relating to UFOs: "At the State Archives, it's—I mean, they've got an amazing collection of stuff, but it's not easy to access, the UFO stuff, they're all classified in a certain way by the military, and unless you know, file numbers, etc. And basically what you want—you can't—it's very difficult to access it. And unless you access it, you don't know what the file number is in the first place." Other researchers had similarly frustrating experiences when looking for alternative materials. In Mark's words, "...actual ufo reports are not something that you can find at a university or anything like that. You have to go to the UFO organizations or the historical records like Project Blue Book files to get reliable material." He further suggested that, when it comes to UFO documents, "the resources aren't adequate to match

demand.” The reality of this is likely partly the result of ufology not being able to find an academic home for itself, and thus splintering off into a different, parallel, quasi-academic universe.

I asked participants what librarians and archivists could do better to assist people with similar research questions. Sharon, unsure how to give an adequate answer, said that “there’s so much more that [librarians and archivists] could be doing,” including that libraries should “stay up to date” with UFO-related books that are being published, and that they “need to stop narrowing down and whittling down resources.” Bill would like them to “talk about their own limitations,” communicate to the public when materials will be deaccessioned, and “whatever librarians can do to go belt and suspenders on their items to make sure people know of better ways to find things, faster ways of finding things.” Bill also mentioned being frustrated that librarians and archivists couldn’t “lead [him] to the exact document I want,” while at the same time not wanting to be “led by the nose,” by librarians or archivists who, it seems to him, don’t know their collections very well. Harriet makes similar suggestions, and also emphasizes that libraries should make UFO books available in braille, and otherwise keep libraries open, specifically to serve disadvantaged users: “So there’s a whole lot of people with disabilities and who are disadvantaged, people who can’t afford to be on the internet, they still need to go to the library if they want to follow something up, you know?” Harriet was one of the only participants to discuss the political and ethical dimensions of libraries, something she may be more aware of with her history as a schoolteacher. Most other interviewees discussed their own research and feelings about libraries exclusively, as it related to the topic, without mentioning broader opinions about libraries.

Harriet and Sharon both touched on what they felt was lacking in their own local public libraries: UFO-related collection development. Harriet discussed the fact that it was “a matter of public interest” and funding, and that if there was more generalized interest in UFOs, with people coming into the library and asking about UFO collections, then maybe collections would be larger. Even if people wanted to see more UFO material in their libraries, Harriet considers her fellow countrymen to be inherently passive—if they went to look for books on UFOs and couldn’t find any, they would simply walk away rather than inform a librarian. Sharon, on the other hand, compared collection development librarians with journalists

in terms of their curatorial roles: “It's quite individual, because I know working with the media, the people who contact me for stories, they're one individual working for a newspaper. And they have an interest. And that was the driving force. If you don't have people in their situations with an interest, it won't happen.” Interest in the topic determines how collections around UFOs are developed. Funding came up a few times with regard to both libraries and archives. Harriet concedes that, “because it is viewed by many as an unproven, fringe subject...in terms of libraries, finance comes into it.” Similarly, Mark, in discussing government archives, points out that, “...There are—not thousands—*millions* of pages of military documents that have not been declassified,” but “they just don't have the resources to do that.” In order to get reliable material, emphasized Eddie, you have to go beyond conventional repositories: “...actual UFO reports are not something that you can find at a university or anything like that. You have to go to the UFO organizations or the historical records like Project Blue Book files to get reliable material.” Reliable materials are especially important for people researching fringe, alternative, and counter-establishment topics, which are rife with hoaxes and other forms of deception.

Bill recounted his experiences looking through the Kennedy Assassination Collection at NARA:

The National Archives is a great example because it's like a joke over there, every year you go there and you have to use a new research method because they changed their policy, they changed their librarians. Things you could find, you can't find anymore, things you couldn't find, you can now find. And these people are smart, and they're helpful when you button them down, but they often don't—can't get you to the exact document you want. And I'm like, why can't you get me to the exact document I want? This is—these documents are more prized than anything else...I wind up trying to teach library science to my fellow researchers. And they're like, “Bill, we got other things to do. We don't want to do that. You know, we just [need to] get more of them online. That's all we can ask for.” And I have to admit, I thought my answer goes, “You're right. Trying to reform the librarians is like trying to reform Congress.” You know, I mean, they're great people, but they're under great pressure. And, and there's a thousand people wanting to see these things at the same time. And the fact that the methods for finding these documents might change is not necessarily their fault. It might be due to political pressure.

Bill views NARA archivists as entrenched bureaucrats who are not able to assist him in the way he wants to be assisted. It is true that, often, archivists do not have such comprehensive knowledge of a given collection that they will be able to point users to a specific document. That's what a finding aid is for—it is an overview of the collection itself. How do archivists, then, respond to something like this that is specifically illustrating that a given person does not trust them because they cannot give that person an

exact document ID? Bill's perception of NARA librarians as useless bureaucrats may be a result of the National Archives' status as a state agency. Yet, he doesn't seem to blame the librarians in the same way that he blames other government officials, and he doesn't seem to think that the librarians are *in on* a larger conspiracy, so to speak. He does feel limited in his research capacity by their incompetence. His suggestion, that librarians and archivists talk about their own limitations, is a useful one: cultivating archival intelligence entails tempering user expectations for what archivists are realistically able to do.⁵⁴³ Users should know that collections are often so large and complex that archivists only have a generalized knowledge of them; archivists will likely be able to point users in the correct direction, but will, more often than not, be unable to give exact coordinates to the document needed.

Harriet feels that information workers need to work on their own bias with regard to collection development. When I asked what she felt when she was not able to find things she was looking for, she responded:

Real frustration, really, because we knew that there was so a lot of information overseas, particularly in the States, and Britain and other places...but what we found here was that everything in our archives and public access seemed to be based on what [adjacent country] was doing, and their attitude, you know, was quite irreverent towards the UFO subject. And so it was difficult, very difficult to access information. *And because it was seen by the staff of these places as a fringe subject or a ridiculous subject, they brought their own personal bias into the arena.* And some of the looks and they, the statements that you're in, and comments that you've got when you asked for certain things, was quite off-putting and *almost made you feel degraded for having asked.* And some Institutes like the State Archives, it's, I mean, they've got an amazing collection of stuff, but it's not easy to access, the UFO stuff, they're all classified in a certain way, by the military, and unless you know, file numbers, etc. And basically what you want, you can't, it's very difficult to access it. And unless you access it, you don't know what the file number is in the first place. [my emphasis]

While Bill felt that, at the National Archives, the information workers helping him were suffering from bureaucratic incompetence, Harriet, importantly, felt that when she visited her country's own National Archives, she was ridiculed, because it seemed to her that the librarians saw ufology as "a fringe subject or a ridiculous subject." While Bill returns to NARA to research, as evidenced by his comment that he must use a different method each time, Harriet does not seem to return to the National Archives. The

⁵⁴³ Yakel and Torres, "AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise."

shaming she feels as a UFO researcher creates a barrier between herself and state-sponsored archives. As I found in my 2019 study, archivists who notice the alternative nature of these research areas may go above and beyond to assist these researchers in an effort to prove to the user that they are not part of the problem.⁵⁴⁴ In fact, she notes that at a different archive, “The... archivists in [city] are really good. I mean, they bend over backwards, and they've been very cooperative.” For archivists to adequately assist to the level desired by these researchers, indeed *required* in order for them to not feel ridiculed or dismissed, they must perform service and accommodation at a higher level than they may utilize when helping other types of researchers.

Participants demonstrated a variety of attitudes toward and feelings about libraries, archives, and their information workers. Impressions and conceptions of archives and libraries ran the gamut between wholly negative to almost entirely positive regarding the physical space of the library or archive and its connections to a kind of *repository imaginary*,⁵⁴⁵ and the experience of conducting research in a library. I asked about participants' experiences with libraries and archives, their general impressions of repositories, and how they felt librarians and archivists could better serve people with similar research questions. Many of my interviewees, perhaps not shockingly, did not do any research in libraries or archives (Felix, Inez, and Jesse specifically⁵⁴⁶).

The physical space of the library or archive, or else the *repository imaginary* it evoked, came up with several participants. Mark and Sharon used the word *love* when referring to, respectively, the library-as-place, and “trawling through the National Archives.” Steve characterized libraries and archives as “amazing places,” and Jon recalled going to the library “just for the environment,” to write, describing both archives and libraries as “a happy place” for him. Mark said further that he “always enjoy[s] walking into the library, I always feel at home there.” The workers at the library played a big part in facilitating its

⁵⁴⁴ Eadon, “(Not) Part of the System: Resolving Epistemic Disconnect Through Archival Reference,”

⁵⁴⁵ Based on Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell's notion of an *impossible archival imaginary*, the repository imaginary has to do with an imagined ideal repository, in terms of space, holdings, and information workers.

⁵⁴⁶ This makes sense, with Missing 411 being mainly an online phenomenon spearheaded by one person.

positive impressions. Steve described an archivist at the Sixth Floor Museum as very helpful, non-judgmental, and professional. Jon stated that he is grateful for all the help he has received from archivists and librarians, and Cyril recalled the librarians at the Carnegie library as helping him find reliable and trustworthy sources; with the library workers there being “very, very nice,” and “very, very helpful.”

Participants also expressed ambivalence and frustration about libraries and archives in general, as well as about specific repositories. For Mark, the International UFO Museum and Research Center in Roswell is “not bad.” He went on to say that researching in archives, for UFO researchers, can be “incredibly frustrating.” Don, who stated that he does not care for archival research, preferring fieldwork, nonetheless characterized the International UFO Museum as a “Mecca” for UFO research. Similarly, Kennedy assassination researchers described a variety of feelings about the Sixth Floor Museum (SFM), the museum and library that has taken over the sixth floor of the former Texas Schoolbook Depository. Although, as we saw above, Steve had a somewhat positive experience at the SFM, he also expressed ambivalent feelings at other points in our interviews. One of the four home movies made at Dealey Plaza on the day of the assassination can only be viewed at the museum, and Steve lamented the reduced research value of having to watch the film “on a crappy computer monitor” that makes it nearly impossible to examine the film in greater detail. Bill expressed frustration about the same film and with the staff of the SFM: “Can you help us get ahold of that video? It's in your possession, we just want to make a copy of it. That's all we want. And he goes, ‘I don't have the authority to do that!’ I didn't say you did! I said, you have the authority to advocate for us when you're on our back on this particular issue, and he said, ‘Oh, I can't say.’” Bill continues, calling the situation “pathetic” in the sense that the person he was asking to advocate for the research community refused to do so because they were worried about their reputation among their colleagues. Here, we can see boundary setting or perceived boundary setting, with an information worker trying to separate himself from the perceived fray of the counter-establishment research community. In fact, Bill recalled being told by fellow researchers not to visit the SFM because it's “filled with bad people.”

Bill also complained that the museum carries books in its library that “tell a one-sided story” and that they have very few books written by members of the “critical community.” Further, for Bill, the SFM has destroyed key spatial evidence: “And they've destroyed some of the best evidence inside the building by the ways they've configured the—the doorways, you can't go in the stairways, you can't go in the elevators you can't see.” Don, who is not a JFK researcher but who has been to the SFM, seemed to believe that rather than desecrating the spatial evidence, the museum has preserved it: “They have [the sniper's roost] glassed off, and they have the boxes set up, supposedly where they originally were, and where he propped the rifle out the windowsill...” For Bill, the SFM is pushing an explicitly establishment narrative: “They certainly don't want to go into the study of Cuba or the study of the Oswald family or the study of the Bay of Pigs and how much the CIA and the military hated Kennedy during the Bay of Pigs. And during the Cuban Missile Crisis. They don't want to discuss it. So they don't want to talk about that at all. So they don't.” For Bill, the SFM aligns itself explicitly with the lone gunman theory and is thus an enemy to his purpose.

Steve has more complicated feelings about the SFM. He has had success conducting research there, and is interested in the staff who work there, but continues to feel ambivalent about the place as a whole: “for as much as [the SFM] is helping research, it's also playing into the establishment bodies that are trying to protect certain information...” And yet, he points out that the SFM was, for him, a particularly good research experience, despite the fact that their process for watching copyrighted footage needed streamlining. Describing the experience of being helped by a librarian there, Steve noted that the person helping him “... was deferential, um, as like, ‘you guys know so much more about this than I ever...’ which is probably—probably good because a lot of people probably come [and] in they're ready for a fight.” Cyril had a positive impression of the SFM. A leadership change resulted in the SFM becoming more open to counter-establishment avenues of research, to the point where they invited Cyril to come speak at the Museum in 2017. While the SFM started out as pro-Warren Report and “they still probably have that basic belief,” Cyril finds himself more sympathetic to them than either Bill or Steve. “I've been, I took the book depository tour, and I'm pleased that they are now opening it up for even

conspiracy [chuckles] authors. They're opening up for those who have been investigating this, and believe there was a conspiracy.” We can see that the museum walks the line between being establishment and, while not ever becoming wholly counter-establishment, accepting and giving a platform to viewpoints that challenge the Warren Report’s conclusions.

Participants tended to agree on the most important archival values to them as users. Both Bill and Don mentioned the importance of preserving evidence. Discussing his desire to have as many documents as possible digitized, Bill suggested that “The simplest thing [archivists] could do is advocate for scanning. So things aren't stolen or destroyed. That's—to me, that's my passion right now: you don't want to throw away the paper copies. No, no, no. But you don't want to leave them as your only point of reference. You don't want to—you want to admit that things might get destroyed or get lost.” Archivists are constantly weighing preservation against access; in some circumstances, original paper copies of digitized documents have to be destroyed due to lack of adequate archival space in the repository. With some kinds of materials, digitization is considered the best marriage of preservation with access, but it can be extremely time-consuming, expensive, and can endanger certain types of more delicate materials. Don discusses his reasons for co-founding the UFO Museum and Research Center: “...I was very concerned that if we didn't create a facility for the historic preservation of all the material, all the interviews, all the affidavits, the video depositions, all ... the files on the case, outside opportunists would come in and exploit, carnivalize, make it into a circus.” By placing it in a museum context and ensuring that the materials were preserved within that context, Don hoped to keep the materials from becoming too commercialized. This also allowed the founders of the museum to shape the narrative in ways they saw fit. Similarly to Bill, Don points to “putting more and more online” as a priority of the UFO Museum and Research Center. I could not find any digitized materials made available online through the Museum.

Other participants mentioned wanting greater access to documents online as well. Felix said he is “very much in favor” of making resources more accessible online. Harriet mentioned the importance of not “hoarding” UFO archives, instead “put[ing] it out there for people to see the massive amount of credible research that’s been done in [home country] for many, many decades.” Along with Bill and

Felix, Steve also notes the importance of being able to do primary source research from home, particularly in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. One piece of access that Mark mentions is organization of the material: “And then or, you know, organizing it well because that makes the work of people that need the type of information I’m describing, it makes it much more possible.” Like Bill, Mark also believes that digitization and online access is the most impactful thing that archivists can do.

Collection development was also on the mind of many participants, both from the perspective of those who developed their own collections and those who were users (some participants were both). Sharon asked how state-sponsored archives come to have materials on UFOs: “But it is interesting how, I mean, who spearheaded that collection of information? You know, to begin with? There must have been one or two people driving that to then want to release it out into the public?” Harriet has written to libraries to ask them to stock specific UFO-related books that she considers to be important and impactful. On the other end of things, she discusses tailoring some of her own collection development and digitization for her private archive around anticipated public interest: “But we are also concentrating now on some of the major documents that relate to the [X] sightings,⁵⁴⁷ because there’s a new book coming out on the [X] this year, and we want to be able to sort of cash in on that, and be able to provide the public with a full arena of other material that’s available on it.” Sharon, Harriet, and Mark are all curators and stewards of their own archives, in addition to being users of state-sponsored archives.

Many of my interviewees emphasized that they did not use archives often, or that they considered themselves “less archival” compared to other interviewees. None of my participants, except perhaps Eddie, considered themselves to be squarely an archival researcher; many of them favored other methods (or used archival research in concert with other methods) like interviewing, surveys, and archeological fieldwork. Many interviewees just did not really use libraries or archives very much, or at least thought they did not use them as much as others: Mark, speaking generally, stated that because of the Internet, researchers interact with archivists less frequently nowadays. Sharon proved his point (though with

⁵⁴⁷ A very well-known series of sightings that took place in Harriet’s country in the mid twentieth century.

libraries), saying that she doesn't borrow library books anymore, since everything is online. Jon said that he was "...probably going to be your least archival-centered source," which ended up being untrue. Archives and libraries did not figure in many people's research, although whether that is due to the Internet's widespread use, a feeling of not being accepted in archival and library spaces, or a combination of both things, is unclear.

Online searches

While searching online is not a *research method* so to speak, it bears inclusion in this section as the primary way that many participants sought information about their topic, in particular those who were associated with Missing 411, including Inez, Felix, and Jesse. Other participants mentioned Internet searches as a mode of gathering information, as well.

It is important to note that Inez lives with a disability that she stated kept her from pursuing an academic career and that may also limit her ability to engage with more intensive research methods. She noted at several points, however, that she tries to approach online searches in an "academic" way:

...when it comes to researching things like UFOs ... there's now enough material out there that people really *can* research it academically, I would say, but like with a lot of other things, I just try to apply what I know about academic research, and critical thinking and how to look at sources, I just try to apply that that information to whatever ridiculous blog I'm reading [laughs]."

Although some of the sources themselves may not be "academic," the approach she takes in evaluating these sources derives from her academic training and indicates that she takes her research seriously, at least to some degree, even when she is seeking entertainment. She also discussed being able to pick up on when she is being "sold" something: "...a lot of stuff on YouTube I think is pretty...trashy. So when it's when I feel it, yeah, it's just the sales thing. It's like, when I feel like I'm being told a story."

Similarly, Felix showed a critical stance towards using search engines. While he stated that, for the most part, he trusts Google as a way to find information, he is wary of its targeted advertising:

I tend to mostly just use Google for things. I tend to trust it for the most part. You know, there's always the question about like the advertising that you're getting and whether that's you know, making you search for things differently or avoiding things. You know, the thing that I, my biggest frustration with something like Google and going about my daily business, I find that

about 90 percent of the time, if the thing that I'm searching could lead to a targeted ad, I'll go to like an incognito window or something like that...my history in Google is very sparse.

Felix is aware of Google's advertising-based business model, attempting to circumvent it by using Incognito mode. Rather than trying to avoid a related infrastructural aspect of web 2.0, recommendation algorithms, Inez merely told me about her awareness of them: "...the internet is, like, this—one little thing leads to another you get on YouTube to watch one video, and then you've got twenty things being suggested to you."

Participants also discussed the online communities they were a part of and their rules for engagement with such communities. Jesse reported on the landscape of Missing 411 online communities: "Most of the communities are just like, people sharing YouTube videos from like, 2003 of some guy in the woods. And there's something like making weird noises or something. It's stuff like that, mostly." He further told me that he does not engage unless something is blatantly false: "Yeah, I mostly read, [but] when I see something that's definitely false, I'll drop a comment." He also discussed the enormous scale of anecdotal stories that exist online: "And I mean, that could—And the premise like how most people kind of think of it is just like, so much stuff...such a volume of all this weird stuff. And of course, there's, I mean, I think probably most of it is either fabricated, which is just like people not understanding how animals work." Though it is difficult to parse exactly what method this might be, Jesse's unique form of wilderness expertise bears repeating here. This kind of expertise is embodied, nearly tacit, and is explicitly a way for Jesse to recognize and relay strangeness he has experienced in the wilderness.

Inez also discussed the Missing 411 online community:

So yeah, you do get excited, you get the sense of, especially when it's something that you've experienced yourself, like, I remember when I first joined the missing 411 [subreddit]. So, you know, I spent a lot of time in the woods. I've never had anything scary happen to me, but I've seen things...that was what sort of drew me into it. And I found most of the stories comforting because I was like, you know, okay, so I'm, I'm not the only one...

For Inez, visiting the Missing 411 subreddit used to be one way that she was able to connect not just with a larger community who had had strange experiences, but also with herself through memories of her childhood. She goes on to describe why she no longer visits the subreddit very frequently:

I don't even go there anymore because all the people in that sub do is talk about how the guy who started Missing 411 is a scam artist. So it's become a whole thread of people just all they do is trash him and try and debunk everything he's doing. And it's like, totally against the point of the group, the group is there to talk about weird things that happened in the woods...I stopped enjoying being in that community because it got it—people missed the point. You know, the point, to me, isn't to prove whether or not cryptids exist. The point is just to share stories, you know? Yeah. So, um, you know, when, when people try to ruin that for other people, I'm just like, you know, that's where I draw the line. Like, I'm not going to argue with somebody about whether or not 9/11 was an inside job. Like, I'm not going to argue with somebody about anything like that, because I just feel like it's, you know, it's pointless. I'm interested in watching other people argue about it. I mean, trust me, like, I like the comment sections of those things. Because, you know, I'm, I'm always amazed by the people.

For Inez, the “point” of communities like the Missing 411 subreddit is not necessarily proving that Missing 411 exists as a phenomenon, or even advocating for better recordkeeping in national parks—rather, it is to entertain and to connect with other people over shared experiences. This solidifies her position on the Dimension 6 spectrum as firmly experiential.

Jesse and Felix also mentioned entertainment as an aspect of their motivation, especially when reading or listening to others' stories of strangeness in the wilderness. In Jesse's words: “I would...assume the main kind of discourse around it is just stories anyway, because most people don't have scopes, most people don't carry cameras, and when they do see this kind of thing they aren't really filming it. So yeah, I'm just kind of reading all the stories, freaking myself out, all that stuff.” The idea of scaring oneself is a kind of entertainment as much as it is based in a kind of reflexive awareness of control. The idea that these stories *could* be real, *could* be something that someone actually experienced, is the basis of both the entertainment value and personal structures of belief around the phenomenon. Such practices of information seeking exist in a liminal space of possibility that the imaginers have a measure of control over, enacting both skepticism and belief at once.

Jon has used both Reddit and WebSleuths for researching his 2020 book and his upcoming book, and describes his preference for the latter over the former:

Yeah, so I do peek at Reddit. I don't know that I'm very good at getting to sort of the bowels of Reddit. I don't know how good I am with it. I'm one of you know, things like WebSleuths is one of my favorites...WebSleuths is really straightforward. And it's kind of one of those dopamine addiction things because because it updates so quickly, there are people on there 24 seven all over the world. And, um, you know, you just watch for the next update, and you know, there's something a little bit addictive about that.

Like Inez's awareness of recommendation algorithms, Jon is aware that there is something psychological happening when using such a real-time research forum—something new and interesting could be posted at any time. He also discusses, in this quote, the importance of user interface (UI) components for his research work.

Harriet talked about her distaste for social media as a whole, implying that it has an adverse effect on the wider ufological research landscape: “Um, well, I do know, most people know, that out there on social media, etc. there ... are a lot of quite bizarre perspectives that are presented with very flimsy evidence.” Further, “I think with the rising of social media, this whole subject has been trivialized, and very little credible research appears on social media. It's people putting up on YouTube a clip of a wobbly light in the sky and claiming that it was a mothership, you know, and it was amazing and this happened and that happened. And a lot of hoaxing.” For Harriet, social media is not a space in which adequate evidence of extraterrestrial contact can be presented to a wider public because of all the accompanying noise. This noise of hoaxing and other kinds of deception was also mentioned by other participants.

Other research methods

Participants mentioned using other methods as well, including forensic experiments and survey methods. Cyril discussed his use of forensic experiments: “We do that too, sometimes with volunteers, as was done in the JFK case. They wanted to see what a bullet would look like, single bullet theory, a bullet that produces seven holes in two men, breaking into significant bones in a six-foot-four, big-bone Texan like Governor John Carney emerging pristine. So, they fired bullets into cotton wadding and then into goat cadavers to simulate rib fracture economy, and then into human cadavers to simulate the fracture of the radius, which is the bone from the elbow to the wrist.” This forensic experiment attempted to recreate the assassination to see if it was possible for a bullet to emerge unaffected as it seemed to do after the assassination. Mark, who conducts survey research and statistical analysis for his day job, included paper

survey instruments in his study of abductees. He described analyzing the data that resulted from this study: “And you have, because I wrote a verbal description of it, you know, written description brief. And then I did a quantitative coding of data. And then of course, I had to do the analysis of that. Then I had to type the whole damn thing up on a typewriter.” Both Cyril and Mark were involved in complex quantitative work around their research topics, producing robust research products. Both are squarely empirical researchers, and both emphasize the complexity and the labor of conducting quantitative work in the days before computers could assist with computational and visual aspects of the work.

This section illustrates that a variety of methods are at work within these counter-establishment research spaces. What does it mean for these researchers to implement these research methods, in many cases without explicit academic training in the method? Are the categories of “amateur” and “professional” research analytically useful in this case, or at all? Even among a small sample size of thirteen, each participant detailed a different approach to their research methods. Interviewing and archival research were the most common methods among my participants, but each researcher approached them differently, obtaining different results. This parallels the diversity of approaches found in methodological discussions in the social sciences and academia more broadly, illustrating that even methodologically, the monological model of conceptualizing conspiracy theories as a flat “category of phenomena” does not work.⁵⁴⁸ Even within specific topics, like ufology, researchers use a variety of methods, including survey research, interviewing, archival research, and archaeological fieldwork.

III. Dimension 4: Practices and Conceptualizations of Research

This section will go into greater depth about Dimension 4 of the RS: how participants conceptualize and feel about research as it relates to themselves and their self-concept. This section will first review how participants talk about themselves as researchers. Then, I will discuss metaphors for

⁵⁴⁸ Klein, Clutton, and Polito, “Topic Modeling Reveals Distinct Interests within an Online Conspiracy Forum.”

research, researcher expertise and reflexivity, and finally, feelings experienced in the course of conducting research, mapping the data onto Kuhlthau's Information Search Process (ISP).

Participants characterized their own research styles in a variety of ways, often using the second person. When Bill tries to discern a person's identity from government documents, he discussed the difficulty of locating clues: "The best thing you can do, I think generally, is try to insert yourself in the milieu, where the project, or the person seems to be the most knowledgeable or the most engaged." Inez described applying "academic standards" to her UFO research because there is so much material out there. Elaborating on this, she tries to "find an alternate source" to corroborate a given idea, as well as using "the most legitimate sources I can find" and generally "valu[ing] critical thinking above all else." She also pointed out the importance of knowing the correct terminology in order to do adequate research. Steve described "picking away at different things you get fascinated by." Eddie considered that it is important to be careful about where you get your data. Cyril, likely speaking legally, stated that "You cannot arrive at a complete opinion unless you have had the opportunity to research."

Other participants spoke about being visual-spatial learners and thinkers. Don, who often mentioned his background in the arts, recounted his unique perspective on Roswell:

We hear Jesse Marcel describing the debris field—I'm, you know, I'm mapping it out in my head. I'm picturing it. I'm envisioning as far as his walking, what they're doing, filling up the vehicles and as they're handling the pieces and then describing the material. Anybody else, it's just writing down words. For somebody else to then you know, collate, and file away later. I'm, no—the movie is running in my head. Tremendous advantage.

Here, Don describes his own thought process, framing it as a "tremendous advantage" for good quality research. In reference specifically to the JFK assassination, similarly, Bill describes needing to "map": "I've got to understand, I've got to map this whole area to even be able to make a more sound, more reasoned judgment [about who killed JFK]. And that mapping is not done yet." For some of the cases he's been professionally involved in, Cyril has carried out recreations and reenactments: "...I've done some things in there, various murder cases that I've been involved in, go there and have people, you know, recreate a shooting, repair, recreate a stabbing, recreate a motivated accident." Acquiring spatial

knowledge involves mapping, both metaphorical and literal, and can require different kinds of research in the process.

As is common in research practice, participants also described looking for patterns in their data. Inez notes that she “can’t help” looking for connections in things. Bill looked for “word linkages,” and Eddie says that it’s possible to see interesting patterns in UFO data, even though it’s not a common practice anymore:

There are just not that many people out there looking for cases as they happen, where you can get a quick investigation, a quick interview of the witnesses and get it down on paper before they start forgetting, before external influences start altering their memories. So there's a lot of problems there, but I still think there's enough that, especially if you start looking for patterns, that you can...reach some pretty legitimate conclusions.

Mark recalled doing exactly what Eddie described, that is, putting together a database of “vehicle interference cases,” or cases where a UFO interacted with a moving vehicle:

How do you find UFO cases? I wasn't going to investigate—I was going out to use the existing literature, of which there was a lot, because cases are published in UFO periodicals. But cases also exist in files. And the center had quite extensive files, because of Dr. Hynek. And then there were other UFO groups as well that I corresponded with and was able to get case copies of cases from them. So through a long process of information gathering, I put together a large database of these types of cases.

Rather than going to collect more witness statements, Mark performed a higher-level research activity by compiling specific kinds of cases into a database. In contrast with Don, who prefers going out into the field and gathering data, Mark is more interested in analyzing the data to draw specific conclusions.

Sharon not only saw a pattern in the data she worked with, but she also came up with a new term for what she had noticed: the “Close Encounter Package” (CEP). The CEP is a collection of traits that are shared by a large number of people who have extraterrestrial experiences. These traits include open-mindedness, care for the environment, and pursuing creative activities in their spare time. When asked how she had come up with the CEP, Sharon recalled: “I had found that when I asked the open ended question of ‘What do you do in your spare time’ that people would tell me they have some creative or artistic pursuit. And that was the beginning of it, I think. And then I, I guess that sort of was the realization moment, I guess that there's something bigger going on here. There must be other markers.”

Having noticed a pattern, Sharon has a “realization moment” that there is something larger at work.

Speaking about the JFK assassination, Jesse suggests that his knowledge of precision shooting, combined with the high number of “coincidences” present at the scene makes it difficult to believe the official story.

Following connections and coincidences and identifying patterns is a hallmark of so-called “conspiratorial thinking,”⁵⁴⁹ but it is also an aspect of *all* research, no matter the topic.

Participants also noted that the existence of multiple “coincidences” or “anomalies” would pique their interest in a topic. For Bill:

So you see anomalies. And my friend, Peter Dale Scott says, well you see these anomalies where—where a certain area of evidence has kind of got a black hole around it...Peter even gave it a name. He called it, he calls it ‘the negative templates.’ And if you follow the negative template, you have a pretty good idea where the sensitive spots are in this case.

Proper research on areas of historical uncertainty, like the JFK assassination, entails following the threads of absences or silences in the historical record. For Bill, and indeed for Peter Dale Scott, an absence is a question to be answered. Inez problematizes this, expressing that it is particularly difficult when one does not have anything to verify:

And I think that's really where a lot of the problems are, is when there isn't anything to verify, you know, because if there isn't a source and we fill in the blanks ourself, you know, and if there's a lot of coincidences and a lot of you know, like, that's the situation with this case with these...girls that go missing. There's so many odd coincidences that happened around it that people just missed. Assume that those coincidences have to add up to something that I don't necessarily see they add up to.

While I am not suggesting that what Bill and Inez are talking about is the same thing—indeed, anomalies and coincidences are not the same—it is an interesting parallel. Beyond the diversity in methods used and conceptualizations of research-selves, participants even have a different approach to encountering silences in the course of conducting research. In this instance, it may be because Bill has access to and patience with primary source archival research, whereas Inez conducts research more casually, mostly online, and through secondary sources. She is reflexive enough to recognize that following a trail of coincidences through YouTube videos may not produce a viable conclusion.

⁵⁴⁹ Jennifer A. Whitson and Adam D. Galinsky, “Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception,” *Science* 322, no. 5898 (October 3, 2008): 115–17, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1159845>.

Metaphors for Research

When discussing research and how they felt about it, participants often characterized research in terms of metaphor. Metaphor can be a powerful way to talk about something that is not easily characterized in other terms; Frost suggests that “Metaphors serve a particular purpose for the speaker. They are grounded in socially shared knowledge and conventional usage, which means that metaphorical statements reveal shared cultural and social understandings of knowledge.”⁵⁵⁰ Use of metaphor can be a way to indicate powerful affect or indescribability of an ephemeral subject. Metaphors were most common when I asked my participants to discuss how they think about research.

Sharon described seeing confluence among different interviewees as “it was like a door started to open.” Steve invoked the same metaphor: “I started researching Oswald and then the door just opened and, you know, once you open one crack, it just gets wider and wider.” Jon invoked the image of searching for a “missing puzzle piece,” expanding to indicate that what he most enjoys about the research process is “...the hunt, the game of it.” Don expressed his love for research in similar language: “But I also love the part of the hunt. I love being in the race and I want to be at the finish line when it's over.”

Bill uses a suite of masculine metaphors to discuss his passion about the topic of the JFK assassination: “And [Oliver Stone] never got over Vietnam...And, when I saw his movie *JFK*, I said, this is my war. This is my war. These people have not just lied to me and not just killed the President, but they changed policy.” Bill also compared the process of JFK research to other markedly imperialist, masculinized, large-scale activities: finding oil and discovering a new land. “It's kind of like your, this is the way people look for oil. You look for oil by seeking the anomalies on the surface of the earth.” Bill also talks about the feelings associated with research in terms of the elation associated with discovery of a

⁵⁵⁰ Nollaig Frost, “Do You Know What I Mean?: The Use of a Pluralistic Narrative Analysis Approach in the Interpretation of an Interview,” *Qualitative Research* 9, no. 1 (February 2009): 9–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794108094867>.

new frontier: “It's just like going to the moon or discovering, you know, Greenland. [Chuckles]. You know, going to the North Pole. America was discovered by the Native Americans thousands of years ago, so I won't use that example, but whenever you're someplace new, you haven't been before. It's that feeling.” Mark, in discussing his researcher identity, employs a football metaphor:

Like, you know, they talk about somebody who, in sports, who does everything kind of? In football years ago, before my time, even, there used to be guys to play both offense and defense, if you can believe that...And so they were all around men. And I'm an all around guy in research, because I do everything.

These metaphors are intrepid, distinctly masculine activities. In some cases, the metaphors are predicated on a kind of moral outrage, as in Bill's comparison to the Vietnam War; in other metaphors, play, joy, pride, and excitement come through.

By contrast, Sharon invoked a pregnancy metaphor when discussing research. Her main research method, interviewing, makes her feel as though she is “pregnant” with her interviewee's story by the end of the interview. Recounting feeling a “sense of pregnancy and responsibility,” Sharon spoke about the need she has to not only accurately record the story of her interviewees, but also disseminate it. She felt an obligation to do so, as they have entrusted their stories to her. After pausing for a moment, she continued:

It's a bit like if you have a best friend and she tells you that she's just been raped...it's a terrible story. You want to be there for them. You're an advocate for them. You want to help them resolve their emotions, you know, all that sort of thing. It's all those feelings that you would feel, you know, I would go...I want to support people. You know, because they've come to me for—they're telling me their story, so I've got to be as supportive and as open as possible. Nonjudgmental, all that, so, you know, trying to, you're working, always, towards doing that.

In this quote, the comparison of an extraterrestrial experience or sighting with sexual violence is indirect; the main metaphor hinges on the *telling*: the confessional disclosure of a traumatic event to someone the traumatized person trusts with the information. Sharon described wanting to care, advocate for, and support people who come to her. This ethic of accountability to and advocacy for her interviewees that is itself foundational to feminist research methods in social science: “Feminists are accountable to research subjects and to those affected by their research. At the very least, the research process should not oppress

or exploit research subjects; ideally, it should empower them.”⁵⁵¹ Though she does not label it as such, Sharon’s research practice is explicitly feminist.

In an extended metaphor, Jon compares doing a writing project to learning to play the drums:

I’ve got an analogy, maybe, that I’ve been thinking about recently, so I started playing the drums two years ago, after a lifetime of kind of wanting to do it and never following through...And so I think sometimes a writing project can be like that, right? You’ve something you’ve been curious about, or it’s been maybe in a different part of your mind for a long time. And then one day you decide to do it. So I started drumming...But when I started on the drums...I didn’t know enough to know that I sucked. But then sucking didn’t matter, right? I wasn’t performing. Sucking didn’t matter. And I think now it’s what I now call license to suck. I think the lesson I learned is we need to do things that we know we’re going to not be good at. And that’s okay. And there’s tremendous pleasure [in] not being good at it. But it’s that not knowing enough to know what I don’t know...Like, so like, in starting out a book? It’s so huge. I don’t know what I don’t know yet. I know it’s vast, and so I can just, I can just do what I can do. And when I learn this little beat here, that’s micro progress. Right? That’s mini progress. I couldn’t do that yesterday. And now today, I can play this beat. And maybe tomorrow I’ll try for an even more complicated beat. I talked to a museum staffer in Maine yesterday. And that was, that was sort of micro progress. And I just got, I got obsessed with one little tiny corner of this new project...drumming is still fun, but it was super fun when it was just banging and making noises. And yeah, and I still suck to some degree. But um, but I know the thing about it now is I know, I know when I’m, when I’m off, or, I know how complicated some of these things I’m trying to play really are. I had no idea when I started out. And I think if I knew all the hardships in a book, I don’t know that anyone would ever start a book if you knew all about it before you started it, you know?

Jon illustrates in this quote that there is an element of play to research—especially in the early stages.

This echoes some of what other participants have said, comparing the process to a puzzle or a sport. Yet, the elements of play become less prominent the farther along one progresses, as you can start to see the ways in which your work does not reach your growing higher standards.

In one of the most telling metaphors of all, Bill discusses the effects of government secrecy on the JFK assassination research community: “If it’s not locked up in JSTOR, it’s locked up in the archives or locked up in other government buildings. They just won’t cough it up. So we are like people with elephants and that dark room, you know, all with our own opinions about what the elephant really is, when we hold on to the trunk or the leg. That makes it more exciting to me. And that makes history a

⁵⁵¹ Alison Wylie, “The Feminism Question in Science: What Does It Mean to ‘Do Social Science as a Feminist’?,” in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, by Sharlene Hesse-Biber (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 United States: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012), 544–56, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483384740.n26>. 6.

pursuit worth pursuing.” Bill’s motivation comes from the honorable fight against a government that appears to be hiding something or covering something up; it also seems to come from a desire to constitute the elephant—to finally find out what exactly it looks like. He is driven by the excitement of trying to solve a mystery with a large group of people.

The ways in which participants characterized research metaphorically can reveal a lot about how they think about research: is the valence of the metaphor positive or negative? In what circumstances does the metaphor work? Further, what is it about research that makes it so easy to talk about using metaphorical language? Research and research practices are highly personal, and may be difficult to explain to an outside person; therefore metaphor helps with communication around research.

Researcher expertise, identity, & reflexivity

Participants variously spoke about their dedication to their research, philosophical approaches, and their expertise. Mark, who has been doing UFO research since the 1970s, suggested that the field’s dearth of funding means that researchers have to be “hardy” and that “it takes a certain kind of person to stick with it.” What kind of person? Someone who has the time, the passion, and perhaps the independent wealth it takes to take the time to do the research. Harriet also went into how she is dedicated to her work: “So I actually do the hard yards, you know, I go out in the paddocks and farms on places, forests and places where people have had sightings and I interview them on the spot.” For Harriet, her dedication to UFO research manifests in her willingness to travel to different places, experiencing the space of where an encounter happened. She takes her work, and herself, very seriously.

Sharon, rather than espousing dedication, reflects on the uniqueness of her mind: she considers herself “philosophically minded” and is interested in a variety of topics including “...science, space, new technology, you know, the environment, things that affect society.” Inez similarly considers herself to “...have just this very inquisitive sort of mind that can't help but see connections and things.” Giving an example, Inez talks about remembering being interested in 9/11 conspiracy theories: “I remember being—

when I first started, like, investigating the 9/11 thing, because I remember on 9/11 feeling like, there's just something too perfect about the way those two buildings are falling. Like that is just, my brain works that way, you know what I mean? But I'm really a skeptic at the same time. I'm very, very skeptical.” While she admits that she sometimes relies on her instincts, almost “sensing” a conspiracy in the case of 9/11, Inez also remains critical of her own thought patterns. This is something we also see with Felix, who considers himself a “scientific minded individual” despite his interest in paranormal subjects, and who refuses to talk about his paranormal interests with his science-minded friends. Both Inez and Felix find themselves considering their own thought patterns, but they are motivated by different forces: Felix by his reputation as someone who approaches things empirically and logically, and Inez as someone who is skeptical of conspiracy theories even as she entertains their possible truths. Mark considers himself scientifically minded as well, but recognizes that he is “...still somebody who looks into odd topics, right? As you would expect...I'm more open to these other kinds of things than the average person, because of my interest in UFOs.”

Although Cyril repeatedly stated that he does *not* identify as a researcher, he continually also demonstrated his expertise as a forensic pathologist. In his words, “I don't fashion myself as an original, basic scientific researcher. I'm not a medical researcher working in the laboratory.”

Discussing his thoughts on JFK's missing brain, he stated:

...in forensic pathology, when we do autopsies, as coroners or medical examiners, and a brain needs to be specially examined, that could be true for things like Alzheimer's. and various neurodegenerative diseases...There are features which cannot be seen under regular microscopic examination. The brain is then fixed in formalin, this is a fixer solution that hardens the brain. You start off with a brain in the fresh state, and it has the consistency of a very well done soft boiled egg. And then if it's been traumatized, that makes it even more more loose, it'll begin to fall apart in your hands. So what is the theme though this isn't something special that I've come up with routinely, probably for hundreds of years: fixing the brain in formalin that hardens it.

Here, he verbally demonstrates his knowledge of forensic pathology. He does, at a later time, admit that although he does not consider himself to be a “basic science researcher,” he is a part of a research group that conducts forensic experiments.

Felix's disconnect between his scientific mindedness and his paranormal interests derives from his educational background and current job. His current job seems to sometimes make him feel like a fish out of water: "And...my boss was like, I didn't think I'd ever [work with someone] that was like a PhD in psychology. So, uh, it's kind of a fun thing, but I think it gives me a different sort of perspective than the average individual." His educational background is very different from his coworkers and lends him a new perspective in his work environment. Like Felix, Inez sees her work history as giving her a unique perspective: "...doing hair made me really super, super observant of people's hidden cues and signals." Similarly, Jesse spoke about his inherent, embodied expertise. Throughout our interviews, he told me about odd experiences he had had in the wilderness. One story he told was about a creature encountered, through footsteps and noises, while camping:

And I'm seeing in the dirt, footprints, not human or deer because I mean, I'm a pretty proficient tracker, I know what those footprints look like. And this was very easy terrain, just like leaves and sticks...I've hunted some pretty big bears, but I've never seen anything like this in my life. And another thing that struck me was that it was not—I don't know, how do I explain this?—A bear has a certain cadence when it walks, you could tell the different animals because they move their feet in different ways; are spaced out differently. And I hadn't seen anything like this. It was like it was galloping.

Jesse is confident in his ability to distinguish the strange from the mundane in the wilderness. This, along with Inez's mentioned skillfulness in reading people, is not often recognized as a type of expertise. How does direct experience with the phenomenon, via a contact experience, a sighting, or, in Jesse's case, simply a strange experience, translate into a kind of expertise? Further, how does kinesthetic experience with the phenomenon constitute information absorption that is not confined within the written word? Further, for researchers like Harriet and Sharon, how does direct experience with the phenomenon inform their qualitative praxis, even their choice of method? To some degree, using interviewing as a method could be a way to build community; a mode of seeing and being seen by those who have had similar experiences.

I asked participants about their identities as researchers, how they perceived themselves and how they felt they were perceived by the outside world. Sharon saw herself as uniquely empathetic: "...not a lot of other people particularly have [the] ability [to empathize]. So it's something that you have to

develop. Or, it occurs naturally.” This is a skill that she recognizes in herself; it is also often thought to be both a feminine skill and one that is highly useful for interviewing. Eddie sees himself as “a scholarly researcher,” and Don puts his research identity into terms that focus on output and dissemination, describing himself as the “go-to person” on Roswell. Felix, on the other hand, considers himself to be on the other end of the research process, primarily consuming information: “I would say that as a whole, I’m not much of a participant and more of a consumer of information, which is sort of why I was like, well, am I really doing research?” The fact that he primarily consumes rather than produces around paranormal/missing 411 topics leads him to question his identity as a researcher, though this may also be due to his history as an academic researcher.

Both Bill and Mark described their own multi-faceted researcher identities. Comparing himself to other researchers within UFO studies, Mark considered himself “...an all around guy in research, because I do everything versus, you know, specializing in something as do[es] like Ted Philips, who’s passed away now, specialized in trace case investigation or, you know, Don Schmidt does case investigations, and that’s what he does, you know, Roswell is his big thing, but mainly Don does case investigations.” Mark employed a variety of methods in his research: archival work, interviewing, survey research, data-heavy research and other quantitative and qualitative approaches. Even though he had done research projects about abductions, Mark did not consider himself to be an “abduction investigator.” He went on to say, “So I take an academic-y approach, right? I say, here’s something I can study, because I have the right skills and the right resources, so I’m going to do that. But I’m not necessarily going to continue in that vein, I’m going to look for something else where I think I can make a contribution and you know, and do that.” Mark may identify as a “generalist” in part because there are so few serious UFO researchers—he is forced to wear a variety of hats, so to speak. In discussing his researcher identity, Bill says “I’m going to keep writing because I’m a researcher. I’m an analyst. I’m an attorney. I’m a writer. I’m a journalist. Those are the things I do. Those are the things I do best. But with that said, those are building blocks for the media people to tell stories because all cultures at the end—as my friend David Talbot says, I didn’t come up with this—are determined by who’s got the best story, the best story wins.” Bill’s

research-self is not rooted in being a storyteller, as are Jon and Steve's, but the story *does* matter to him as a steppingstone to disseminating truth. Bill conveyed a complex identity when it comes to research, informing the way he approaches his work. Mark, on the other hand, has a generally stable research identity/ self-concept; the complexity of his work is derived from the diversity of methods he uses. Mark is thus more interested, perhaps, in conducting the research, whereas Bill seems interested in convincing others of his position through quality research and storytelling.

As with other types of researchers, in particular those in the social sciences, many participants displayed researcher reflexivity. Inez noted that she enjoys her own self-awareness: "And one of the really interesting ways to study it is...through conspiracies and belief, you know, and ... part of that is I like observing the way my own mind plays with its beliefs." In such a way, Inez considers and questions the conclusions she is drawn to—something we are often told that "conspiratorially minded" people do not do, or are not capable of. Reflexivity itself seems to be something that academics consider beyond the scope of conspiracy theorists.⁵⁵² Yet, many of my participants would often talk about questioning their own stances on something without referring to it explicitly *as* reflexivity. Steve talks about trying to avoid confirmation bias and wanting to keep an open mind, always questioning: "...then the little, like questions begin to eat at you. And like when somebody brings up, well, what about the mob? Oh, I don't think the mob did it. Why? Why not?...and, uh, so you start, you have to question. The hardest thing was to fight that confirmation bias, too. Cause I set out [to] like, you know, keep an open mind. You're not looking for a conclusion. You're letting it take you wherever. Eventually you're gonna latch onto some conclusion and feel like, victories when you see something that confirms it." Here, Steve outlines, like Inez, questioning himself and his conclusions as a kind of praxis he employs to avoid confirmation bias. Qualitative social scientists practice reflexivity in much the same way. Bill discussed speaking with people who hold opposing viewpoints to him, specifically Trump supporters: "Frankly, I enjoy talking with people who

⁵⁵² Biljana Gjoneska, "Conspiratorial Beliefs and Cognitive Styles: An Integrated Look on Analytic Thinking, Critical Thinking, and Scientific Reasoning in Relation to (Dis)Trust in Conspiracy Theories," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (October 12, 2021): 736838, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.736838>.

have that [position], because I think I want to—if I don't have confidence in my belief system then I should be doing something else, you know? And if I don't have confidence in my research or being willing to change my mind, I should have my head examined.” Here, Bill balances his confidence in his own point of view, backed up by research, with a willingness to have his mind changed by more compelling evidence. Again, we see that the way these researchers practice reflexivity, for those that do, is quite similar to the ways in which social scientists practice reflexivity.

Research Feelings

Kuhlthau’s Information Search Process (ISP) was foundational to the design and implementation of this study. I asked participants what their feelings were during the beginning, middle, and end of the research process and received many different responses, some of which explicitly had to do with information seeking, and others that had a more generalized affect having to do with the topic at hand. Participants related a huge variety of emotions with both negative and positive valences. One thought that I continued to come up against in the course of this research is an essentially unanswerable question: How does the treatment of the topic by the wider world (its dismissal, its ridicule) affect the emotions that come up in the course of conducting research? Does counter-establishment research require a new approach to the ISP?

TABLE 2. Information search process (ISP).

Stages in ISP	Feelings Common to Each Stage	Thoughts Common to Each Stage	Actions Common to Each Stage	Appropriate Task According to Kuhlthau Model
1. Initiation	Uncertainty	General/ Vague	Seeking Background Information	Recognize
2. Selection	Optimism			Identify
3. Exploration	Confusion/ Frustration/ Doubt		Seeking Relevant Information	Investigate
4. Formulation	Clarity	Narrowed/ Clearer		Formulate
5. Collection	Sense of Direction/ Confidence	Increased Interest	Seeking Relevant or Focused Information	Gather
6. Presentation	Relief/ Satisfaction or Disappointment	Clearer or Focused		Complete

Figure 4.4, reproduced from chapter 2, Kuhlthau's ISP

As one of my participants, Felix, reminded me: the most common thing he felt while doing research is curiosity. Is curiosity an emotion? It doesn't seem to have a valence, positive or negative. Other interviewees also had trouble discussing what feelings came up for them during research, some seeming confused as to why I was asking about feelings in an interview that was ostensibly about research. Mark, although he did eventually share some of the feelings he experienced while researching, initially answered my questions about research feelings with methodological answers, describing his research process and how it had become second nature to him. Going further, he said: "I don't think I have *feelings*, to be honest, that strike me. What I have is more, *thoughts* about trying to not do things too

quickly actually. To take the time to get, you know, well-focused and to plan carefully about how to do the research, you know, in other words, not rush into projects...not a feeling, but it's an attitude. It's a perspective on, you know, doing research.” When asked about research feelings, Cyril interpreted the question similarly: “How do I feel about research? It's essential. It's the key to the case.” Likewise, when I asked Don what feelings came up in the course of his research, he recounted his process of checking astronomical reports, debunking false sightings, etc., before interviewing sighting witnesses. Reiterating the question by asking directly about what he feels when interviewing witnesses produced a different response: Don responded by discussing the relationships he cultivated with interviewees (characterizing them by “mutual respect and mutual understanding”) and describing seeing some of the witnesses break down emotionally. Without naming a specific feeling, he seemed to describe the experience as *emotional*. Many of my participants, in answering the question of what they feel in the course of research, thus denied the presence of affect and emotion almost completely. This echoes the positivist ideal of the objective, detached (white, male, universalizing) researcher.

I will not be elaborating on every single instance of an emotion as mentioned by an interview participant; however, I will touch on each emotion to give a comprehensive picture of the breadth of emotional landscape felt by my participants. I have sorted the feelings that were shared with me into three categories of valence: negative, positive, and no discernable valence (neutral). Participants recounted feeling challenged, angry, anxious, disappointed, disturbed or upset, afraid, frustrated, discouraged, intimidated, isolated, paranoid, and wanting to give up. They also described experiencing enjoyment, confidence, moments of play, enthusiasm, excitement, surprise, feelings of honor, empowerment, happiness, optimism, pleasure, love, entertainment, satisfaction, and validation. Experiences mentioned in the course of discussing feelings that did not have a discernible valence included curiosity, intuition, the endlessness of research, motivation, strangeness or oddness, and uncertainty. The most frequent feelings reported were frustration, enjoyment, moments of play, excitement, and entertainment. Simply looking at the ISP model, we can see that participants conveyed feeling nearly all of the emotions outlined by Kuhlthau, except, notably, clarity. This is likely due to the nature of their research topics, which are

enduring mysteries. Thus far, much of the results indicated in this section illustrate that counter-establishment research is largely comparable to many other kinds of research. However, the enduring uncertainty, mystery, and lack of clarity *does* make these topics unique; many of the questions asked by these researchers are extraordinarily difficult to answer, if it is ever possible to do so.

Participants often described their motivation for doing research as being rooted in an emotion, and these were all across the board in terms of valence. Harriet, a frequent speaker around the world at different UFO conferences, described feeling like an outcast even within ufology: “But, you know, the UFO field will listen to my speech and say, ‘Wow, that was amazing.’ But to the general public, I’m still an experiencer. So I’m this slightly freaky, unknown quantity. And can anything I say be trusted? Because they put me in this box that has ‘abductee’ written on it.” She says elsewhere that she does not appreciate being referred to as an abductee, considering it an American concept. When asked how it made her feel to be isolated in such a way, she said: “It used to make me very angry. But I realized that anger wasn’t getting me anywhere, but research might.” She uses her anger at being put in a box and treated like an outsider as motivation to further her research. Bill, on the other hand, seems motivated by his confidence: “I have great confidence that we’re going to continue to make strides in this case and cases like it...” He also mentions the “frisson” he feels when doing research, a kind of hair-standing-up-on-your-arms feeling, which he indicated was one of the first feelings he can discern in the early stages of a research project. Mark described feeling excited in the midst of a project, as well as pride at having been the only person to do a particular kind of research. Referring to a database of vehicle interference cases that he put together, Mark allows himself to express pride in his work: “...the complete catalog, you know, with analysis, like I did, you know, I’m still the only one that’s done that. So, of course, I didn’t know that, I couldn’t see the future, but I *knew* that I was doing important work. And so that made it very exciting...to make your contribution.” Because he knew he was doing important work, and was making his particular contribution to the field, Mark felt motivated and excited at the prospect of completing the project.

Only Steve expressed uncertainty about his research. According to Kuhlthau, uncertainty is the feeling primarily experienced during the first stage of research. However, Steve did not recall being

uncertain at the beginning of the research project; rather, he noted that after reading so many different books about the Kennedy assassination and discovering that some authors were less trustworthy than others, he started to become “unsure of what is fact.” Thus, the particular uncertainties and mysteries of the topic lend themselves to feelings of uncertainty that continue throughout the research process. Steve was the only person to express feeling uncertain. During the analysis stage of this work, I wondered if other researchers experienced uncertainty as well, but did not tell me because they were (perhaps unconsciously) performing confidence and certainty in order to bolster the reputation of their topics.

In stage 2 of the ISP, Selection, Kuhlthau lists “optimism” as the primary emotion. Participants recalled experiencing enjoyment, enthusiasm, and excitement in the course of conducting research. Eddie has “...always enjoyed going on the hunt...” in newspaper archives, looking for articles relevant to his research. He also mentioned enjoying “...the discovery, the chance to find these connections I didn’t suspect.” Likewise, Sharon recalled that, “I really enjoy going through those firsthand accounts, because those hard copies are all from people who’ve written it themselves.” As Eddie values the process of hunting through a newspaper archive, Sharon values the process of looking through firsthand reports of UFO encounters—both experiencing enjoyment as they go through primary sources. In an old adage, Bill suggested that “It’s not work if you enjoy it.” Similarly, Mark stated that “research is the thing I enjoy the most of what I have to do. And I get to do less of it than I would like to do.” Enjoyment and passion are required in order to build an “under-the-table career,” as Eddie put it, in a counter-establishment area of research.

Participants also expressed excitement. Discussing his work around Roswell, Mark described visiting the crash site as the “most exciting thing.” Jon, discussing the feeling of breakthrough, went into the brain chemistry of it all:

If you can maybe include some emotions, like I think the research is—I get, I don't know whether it's adrenaline or dopamine...like there's nothing more exciting than getting that one clue that is a breakthrough that leads you to that part of the puzzle that you've been working on, you know, or that one source that finally calls you back. Or, or that FOIA request that comes in, and that's that missing puzzle piece. That is the thrill of writing.

Likewise, Inez spoke about the feelings of breakthrough in terms of brain chemistry and/or neurotransmitters released during research, citing a feeling of a “little high” when she finds something that seems like an inexplicable coincidence.

Many participants also used the word “love” when describing how they felt about research. Jon described “loving” the distraction of being in the midst of a project and getting distracted by it in the midst of everyday life. Sharon stated that she loves “trawling through the national archives,” and Steve said that he loves “getting lost in the stacks.” Don repeatedly stated he loves fieldwork, and that he loves “the hunt” involved in conducting research. He also stated that his work, and the work of the rest of the team, on the 1994 Roswell movie was “...a passion of love for the subject, a love for getting it correct, a love for doing it as best we could.” Participants show again and again, through the language used to talk about their work, their unique passion that drives them to continue their research.

Stage 3 of the ISP sees researchers feeling confusion, frustration, and doubt. While doubt was not a feeling described by any participant, confusion and frustration were certainly discussed. Felix recalled feeling frustrated because there is no way to “seek out information in a systematic way” when doing research online about paranormal topics: “There’s not any sort of rigor whatsoever when it comes to researching the paranormal, because evidence is so scant and it’s difficult to get any sort of physical evidence. And there’s so many different hoaxers...” The lack of trustworthy evidence frustrated Felix. Steve likewise described the lack of a “central hub of information” online about the assassination as “kind of frustrating.” Harriet also came up against frustration when conducting research because she felt her country did not give enough credence to the topic, so its state archives were scant. She felt especially frustrated because she knew how much archival information was available in the United States. For Steve, some subtopics of JFK assassination research are more frustrating than others: “the closer you get to the military, the less information there is.” In these instances, and in others, it seems that frustration is a response to a lack of adequate information about a topic or an inability to access adequate information. Frustration can also constitute a moment of crisis for these researchers. Felix feels that trying to dive deeply into a topic can be “Sisyphean” and that he often will get “...frustrated enough trying to dig that it

just stopped me from trying to dig deeper for the most part.” Frustration is a part of Steve’s larger researcher reflexivity journey; he seemed to view it as a necessary steppingstone toward becoming a more self-aware and well-rounded researcher:

If you find something that doesn't confirm [your hypothesis], and if you're unsettled, that's a bad sign. That means you're not—you're holding onto something like emotionally, that is not about the research. And so it becomes about being right and knowing the answer and trying to be the smartest guy in the room and you have to let go of that. That was a big turning point that I had to fight. That felt good once I got there. And, but I mean, certainly in the midst of it, though, the frustration and confusion were overwhelming. It's just like, why am I, why am I staying up pouring over these CIA documents that lead nowhere?

That Steve became so deeply involved in the topic that he no longer had “grounding” and thus felt frustrated and confused parallels Felix’s frustrations about not being able to find trustworthy information. However, the two approach feelings of frustration differently: Felix allows himself to drop a topic and move on to the next one, whereas Steve takes the time to reflect on his research practice, determine what needs to change, and move forward with his topic. This difference is, I believe, due to fundamentally distinct views of their information seeking practice(s) around counter-establishment topics: Steve views it as serious research, whereas Felix mostly views it as entertainment.

While the “clarity” of Stage 4 is nowhere to be found, many participants discussed its inverse: the endlessness of the research (not necessarily as a negative thing). Bill sympathized with those who “hear the call” of JFK research and decide to turn it down: “But right now, with all these cases, everything can be said, but nothing can be decided. Everything can be discussed, but nothing can be known. And so people groan and walk away from it. Because it's a time suck. It's a waste of time.” Both Bill and Mark mention the dearth of committed researchers in their respective fields, especially young people. Since they are both topics that have been around for so many years and heavily researched, there is a lot of information to absorb and it is easy to become frustrated by the endless nature of the topic. When asked what advice he would give to new researchers who might be interested in the JFK assassination, Steve suggested that they needed to be mentally prepared and passionate: “I would tell them to ask themselves two questions: Why are they interested? And how much of their life are they willing to say goodbye to, to pursue that? Just think about what else you could be doing with your time. And as long as you're sure, like,

Oh, no, I want—this is what fuels my fire and I'm interested. Cool. But it's going to take more of your life than you anticipate.” There was a sense, among some participants, that the topic has a kind of mind of its own, that it is pulling them along almost without their consent. Indeed, discussing the immense amount of work he has put into cracking CIA cryptonyms and pseudonyms for the Mary Ferrell Foundation, Bill mentioned having to “wean myself off of it.” It became easier to move away from this work “...when you realize the enormous time suck and the gradual lack of hard important pseudo[nym]s that you're cracking. I feel like we've cracked most of the important pseudos now.” Although he accomplished a great deal with this work, Bill did not mention any feelings of satisfaction accompanying it (though this does not mean that he did not feel it).

Participants discussed the endlessness of the topic as both a positive and as a negative. Mark described Roswell as “the endless project.” As previously mentioned, Bill expressed his desire to “map out” the entirety of the JFK assassination in order to be able to draw any kind of substantive conclusions. For Eddie, who has been researching airships for forty years, research “never gets old.” In his words, “I can keep going and going with this forever—of course I've got to write the book and be done with it, I guess. But as long as I can keep going, I will.” Eddie’s research identity and his larger self-concept are deeply ingrained in his airships research; not just in writing and disseminating his work, but also in the act of researching itself. In contrast, Steve, whose research identity rests on storytelling and thus dissemination, reports feelings of overwhelm at the endlessness of the topic: “I mean it's—sometimes it's overwhelming to switch to a completely different road than you've been researching for a while. It's like, I knew the CIA and Russian world of that time so well that then going into New Orleans felt just overwhelming and like starting from scratch again.” Recognizing the endlessness of a topic can be motivating, as it is for Eddie and Bill, or discouraging, as it was for Steve.

Stage 5 involves a sense of direction and confidence. Bill was the only interviewee who mentioned feeling confident, in both the field of JFK research as a whole and in his own work. Something that does not appear in the ISP, but which was very present in all conversations with my participants, is the notion of research as a site for play, entertainment, and enjoyment. Eddie, Felix, Mark, Bill, Steve, Inez, and Jon all

used the word “fun” at least once to describe their research. Eddie, Mark, Steve, Jon, and Bill used the word to refer to archival research (both online and offline).

In a different vein, Inez described the feeling of letting herself become convinced of a conspiracy theory about the Titanic⁵⁵³ as “fun” through how evidence was presented in a YouTube video. Similarly, Felix describes reading about conspiracy theories:

I think it's fun to read those things. I've definitely read a bunch of the flat earth things. And it's also another one of those ones where it's fun to be like, I wonder if this would be true, what would the world look like? What would be going on? And it's kind of like, you know, it makes you feel, in a way, powerful, like, oh, this is fun, secret information that I have.

Inez and Felix are much more casual in their information seeking habits when compared to other participants, pursuing entertainment more than anything else. Although they may not be as “serious” as other researchers I spoke with, they do certainly exhibit reflexivity: they recognize that they are merely entertaining these theories; neither of them considers themselves proponents of the Titanic conspiracy theory on one hand, or flat earth on the other.

Inez goes even further by saying that “I just try to apply the best academic standards I can to any kind of information I'm looking at, you know, are there and I was just gonna say, and at the same time, because part of why I do this is to entertain myself...” While she tries to keep her standards high, her motivation for seeking information out on the Internet is to entertain herself. Often, she will continue watching a YouTube video, for example, only as long as it holds her interest and keeps her entertained:

So it's not so much that I have, like, sources that I absolutely 100% believe in, it's more like, there's a spectrum of...how seriously I will take something, or how much of my attention I'll give it. You know, what I mean? Or how much I'll enjoy it. Because for me, enjoyment is the goal. It's part of the goal. It's being—it's being entertained by, you know, I don't know what it is, like I said, being entertained by, by feeling my own mind being played with and convinced of things, and then it's almost like an exercise: can I make it back to reality or not?

Conspiracy theorists are often portrayed as being completely out of touch with reality; this quote from Inez illustrates once again her self-awareness around the fact that she seeks information about these topics in part to entertain herself, and to experiment with her own perception of the world. Participants like Inez

⁵⁵³ The theory being that the Olympic sank instead of the Titanic, as an insurance scam concocted by the owners.

and Felix illustrate the epistemic diversity of people who seek information in earnest about conspiracy theories online, even in a more casual manner.

Games, puzzles, and a language of play also came up as a way to linguistically frame and discuss the process of research. Felix described “toying around” and “playing around” with the unexplained. Don characterized his work with Roswell as “the adventure for ten lifetimes.” For Bill, cracking cryptonyms and pseudonyms in CIA documents “...makes the New York Times [crossword] puzzle look like a distraction.” When I commented about the amount of work that must have taken, he said: “It’s like anything else: it’s not work if you enjoy it...it’s just a game.” He further refers to the mystery of the JFK assassination as “one of the world’s greatest puzzles.” Jon, similarly, said that, “I think the big puzzle of it is what I think is my favorite part of a book project.” Eddie “...always enjoyed going on the hunt for these things,” as well as the sensation of discovery and “the chance to find...connections I didn’t suspect.” Mark, similarly, expressed regret that he did not have more time and funding to do more research. While Steve mentioned the importance of mentorship and community as an aspect of the research, Bill was the only person to cite the research community as a factor in his enjoyment—when I asked about his research community, he said: “Well...my community is a series of small relationships that I nurture. I spend more time on the telephone—I feel like a teenage boy, you know, yakking on the phone—with people, I know some of whom I’ll never get to meet in person, but I know them really well, you know, on a certain level, because we share the same interests.” Enjoyment and elements of play surface at many points during the research process for most participants, from the most serious researchers to the ones who were purely in it for the entertainment.

By contrast, some participants described feeling emotionally disturbed at certain points in their process. Sharon described the difficulty inherent in interviewing UFO witnesses and experiencers: “... and sometimes you have to debrief yourself afterwards, because...there's been a very emotional upsetting thing. But you're sort of carrying this energy around with you for a while until you can process it, mentally and emotionally, yourself. And if someone's quite disturbed, it can be quite...emotionally disturbing for me.” Sharon here describes the emotional difficulties she faces in her research, and the toll

it can take on her. Harriet also touched on this: “So, yes, sometimes you can, you can be touched quite deeply by what people say. But you're still there to gather data first. But also help to—help to facilitate, facilitate the person to express their feelings.” For Sharon and Harriet, the interview work they do has a twofold purpose: to help the witness or experiencer therapeutically process any feelings they may be having about the incident, and to gather data for their own records. This former aspect requires a measure of self-care and emotional processing as an aspect of procedure.

According to Kuhlthau, the final stage of the ISP, stage 6, can result in “Relief/Satisfaction or Disappointment.” These feelings were expressed by participants, but Jon was unique in his expression of anxiety at this stage: he discussed at several points that he does not enjoy the experience of disseminating his research by having a published book out in the world, despite his research identity being rooted in notions of storytelling and journalism. Don also expressed disappointment regarding a mid-2000s televised archaeological dig at the Roswell crash site that he was involved with, which he thought of as “more of a reality show” than a serious research endeavor. In this instance, Don’s disappointment derived from his lack of creative control and the feeling that the TV network who produced the documentary were not taking the research of it as seriously as he was.

Participants also expressed feelings of satisfaction and validation. Bill reported “...a feeling of accomplishment when you engage in a particularly good piece of analysis,” especially when the researcher is able to explain why an event occurred or why one person knew another. At another point, Bill talked about the assortment of feelings that came up for him in the course of doing research: “Besides the fascination—I mean, you get the thrill of discovery, you get the fascination of discovery, you get the sense of...accomplishment that you have been able to not only find it cause that's the research part but analyze it.” For Bill, a large part of the satisfaction and fulfillment he derives from research can be traced back to analysis: it is not just about cracking pseudonyms and cryptonyms, but also about analyzing what those documents are saying. Mark also described satisfaction at several points: discussing his research on abductees, he said, “...not only was I happy with the way we conducted the study, but I was pretty pleased with the findings in terms of the patterns and the kind of profile that we found for abductees.” Even if the

research was not necessarily going well, Mark reported positive feelings: “So my main feeling is, I guess, satisfaction. Even if the research isn't necessarily going well. You know, I'm... feeling satisfied—and/or at least enthused, maybe ‘enthused’ is even better.” He further described feeling satisfied and fulfilled at a variety of stages in his research, because he felt he was making a contribution to the field. Jon’s satisfaction was pointedly journalistic: “For me...as [the project] gets more focused I guess some of the similar breakthroughs still can happen in the satisfaction of getting that source to talk.” Harriet recalled an extraterrestrial sighting and possible experience she had in which she saw a bright light at night, experienced paralysis, and lost her memory of what happened afterwards. She told her husband, who “thought I was completely insane,” and then mentioned it at work, when “...the principal's wife, who was one of the teachers there also took me aside and said, ‘I saw something like that the other night.’ And she explained what she had seen from her house up on me up on the cliff, which corroborated my story, my experience. So that was a feeling of elation and validation that someone else had seen something that tied in with what I'd seen.” Harriet’s feelings of validation derived from someone else confirming and corroborating what she had experienced herself. In many instances, with these research topics, there is never a sense of “completeness” because the mystery has not been satisfactorily solved. There may be research products put out, but it is a constant attempt to reconstitute and investigate a topic that motivates these researchers. To what degree is this different from other areas of research, science, for instance, which is also iterative in that it is a long-form collaborative project to try to understand and constitute the world? I will return to this question in the following section.

IV. Dimension 6: Epistemology: Subjugated Knowledge, Unknowledge, and Disciplinary Boundaries

In this section, I will go through a variety of factors related to the epistemic approaches of the participants. This includes attempting to place them somewhere on the Dimension 6 Spectrum (figure 4.2, above). I will classify each participant as either (1) empirical, (2) empirical-experiential, (3) experiential-empirical, or (4) experiential. These categories are not wholly stable and necessarily imprecise: whatever epistemic position conveyed to me in this mode of research may be different in other areas of a given participant's life.

To discuss epistemology and disciplinary boundaries, I will use ufology as a case study, as it is the most established quasi-discipline among the three topics. Adopting a case study model will allow me to examine the boundaries of the discipline and the participants' perspectives on science. This section will also assess participants' perspectives on evidence and what they find to be a trustworthy source. The second section will look at the notion of *unknowledge* as it relates to the three topics. These counter-establishment topics go beyond mere opposition to official knowledges: their status as subjugated knowledges derives from their dealings with a kind of *unknowledge*. For the purposes of this project, *unknowledge* refers to persistent silences, disinformation, bad or corrupt research, hoaxing, and a general unknowability of counter-establishment topics with enduring mysteries at their centers. That the topics at hand are enduring mysteries and thus built on a shifting foundation of *unknowledge* contributes to their status (or lack thereof) as subjugated knowledges: fundamental unknowability can be weaponized by proponents of official knowledges and used as a method of quieting or stopping inquiry into a topic.

Case Study: Ufology

In Karin Knorr Cetina's exploration of the knowledge production ecosystems in the sciences, she problematizes the notion of what a "knowledge society" actually is: "A knowledge society is not simply a society of more experts, more technological gadgets, more specialist interpretations. It is a society permeated with knowledge cultures, the whole set of structures and mechanisms that serve knowledge and unfold with its articulation."⁵⁵⁴ Some of these knowledge cultures operate outside of academia, and in so doing are often considered to not be capable of knowledge production at all. What might a *subjugated* knowledge society look like? This section will attempt to answer that question through an exploration of ufology as a case study of a quasi-academic field. Many ufologists have a complicated relationship with academia, specifically because of the University of Colorado study (outlined in chapter 1). For many, this study was the closest they ever came to being taken seriously by academia and to finding an academic home. It was only after the University of Colorado study's disappointing results that J. Allen Hynek founded the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS), effectively carving a new pathway for ufology to establish itself as a field in parallel to, but distinctly outside of, academia. For this reason, ufology has had and continues to have an underdog kind of self-concept, considering itself to have been unfairly ejected from the ivory tower. In Mark's words, "institutions are not set up to treat things as mysteries," so those who want to study mysteries must set up their own sites of (subjugated) knowledge production.

Locating the Boundaries of A Quasi-Academic Field

This case study outlines the boundary-setting—often a kind of demarcation—taking place within (some of) the different epistemic approaches active within ufology. Ufology is divided into several

⁵⁵⁴ Karin Knorr Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 7-8.

camps, but only two rose to the surface in the course of my interviews: one that considered itself scientific and concerned with hard evidence (also known as the “nuts-and-bolts” approach) and the other that is more interested in experiences, in “soft” witness evidence, and in psychological-therapy approaches (considered by some, but not all, to be the “new age” side of ufology). Among my participants, this ufological divide fell along gendered lines: Mark, Eddie, and Don are all on the more empirical side of the spectrum, and Harriet and Sharon are much more on the experiential end of the discipline. Rather than using *nuts-and-bolts* and *New Age* to distinguish between these two areas, which other authors have done,⁵⁵⁵ I will use the framework of Dimension 6, differentiating between shades of the empirical and the experiential.⁵⁵⁶ Not only do the terms “new age” and “nuts and bolts” feel slightly outdated, but they also restrict study of a subject to specific epistemic, theoretical approaches. *Experiential* research and *empirical* research, on the other hand, draw attention to both epistemology and methodology and can overlap significantly according to a given researcher’s approach. Interviews with witnesses, for example, can be both experiential and empirical, according to the approach of the researcher. The empirical view is, in Mark’s words, “more agnostic about the cause of UFOs,” meaning that empirical ufologists do not unequivocally state that the crafts people are seeing are extraterrestrial in origin (though they admit they could be). Those approaching the subject empirically want to study the phenomena, whatever the cause may be: extraterrestrial, human, natural, etc. Also in Mark’s words, they value “hard evidence” over “soft evidence,” even though it is “difficult to get a UFO into a lab.” Those taking an experiential view are much more interested in human dimensions related to expanding consciousness; they tend to prefer exploring the experiences of experiencers or communicators.

How does an empirical ufologist conceptualize the field? Mark discusses ufology and its relationship to academia at length: although the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) and CUFOS exist, they do not have adequate resources of the kind that would accompany having a home within an academic

⁵⁵⁵ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*.

⁵⁵⁶ The Dimension 6 spectrum is not specific to ufology: it can be extrapolated to the other topics examined in this project, and further, to research practices in general.

institution. Further, the level of interdisciplinary collaboration and discussion that takes place within academic environments is not possible. He continued:

...the first thing to remember, to think about UFO studies is that it's not an academic field, of course....what's most important about it actually, not that it's not recognized—that it's fringe, and then people think it's crazy. But for people who are serious, what that means is that there is—and that's why the Center is so important—but there's no true organizational support for many people who are interested...there's no pathway to become a “ufologist,” or UFO researcher, right? There's no recognized study plan or school to go to. So everybody gets sent to it on their own, and finds different ways to learn, you know, what they think is important...But we also treat it like a quasi-academic subject, right? Because it can't be completely academic for the reasons that I've explained. But we tried to be as true to that approach as we could.

Mark emphasizes here and elsewhere that there is almost no funding available for those who wish to seriously study UFO phenomena. For Mark, the lack of financial support or an institutional home affects every aspect of ufology. One such aspect is a lack of interested researchers, due in part to the difficult requirements of developing true expertise in the topic. He described feeling frustrated and anxious because he does not have the time or capacity to teach potential ufologists. At the same time, he conveyed exasperation that potential researchers often do not want to engage deeply with the subject. For Mark, there is a long list of required reading before one can consider oneself a ufologist, because “UFOs have been around a long time, as you know, lots of people have done things. We haven't solved the UFO mystery, but there's lots that has been done.”

This kind of adequate expertise in ufology is extremely difficult to achieve, requiring what Mark described as a graduate-level understanding and work without any accompanying degree. Tracing this to his own education level (PhD), this could be a reflection of the amount of time and energy he has dedicated to the topic himself, manifesting as a kind of gatekeeping: anyone else who wants to research at his level must become a ufological autodidact. Continuing, he justified his stringent standards:

Because UFOs are a very complex topic, whatever UFOs are...to really understand things, and the broad nature of things, you have to have a deep understanding. If you're a good astronomer, and somebody—you know nothing about UFOs, but you know a lot about astronomical stuff—and somebody sends you a UFO report that actually is a misperceived Venus...you can look at the report and say, "Oh, that's a misperceived Venus," That's simple...That's, you know ...that's nothing about knowing UFOs—that's just being able to apply your expertise to this *very* narrow question of what might explain this *one* report. But to become knowledgeable in the field is a tremendous undertaking. And so, circling back to where I started, you know, this is something that we have [to find] solutions to, because there is no easy solution, you know, but people will

come into the field, I just, I sigh and I feel almost sorry for them, because there's so much to learn, to really become, and many people never become knowledgeable, they just don't know the history, the literature on what's been done.

Here, Mark distinguishes between two types of expertise that could be applied to the UFO field:

specialized expertise and expertise in UFO studies and its literature. He sees astronomical expertise as able to be *applied* to the context of UFOs, specifically identifying those sightings that may be misperceived planets. Expertise in the *study* of UFOs, however, is more widely applicable to the field of ufology in general, requiring a great deal of general knowledge in the area. Mark's remark about feeling sorry for new researchers is interesting as well; here he implies that, given funding and/or an academic home, he might be able to mentor these interested parties more directly. But as Eddie put it, interest in UFOs is an under-the-table career and likely does not leave much room for extra time it takes to mentor. Especially when, as it seems from Mark's point of view, nobody is sufficiently motivated. Ideally, given the time, Mark or other experts would be able to develop a curriculum containing trustworthy articles, lectures, and books. Of course, he emphasizes that no one in the field has the time or resources to put such a thing together. Mark's stringent empiricism keeps him from welcoming new UFO researchers by allowing them off the hook, so to speak, of a graduate-level education in the subject. For Mark, maintaining an empirical epistemic approach to ufology is a top priority: without stringent empiricism, the ufology exemplified by CUFOS would devolve into chaos, unraveling the quasi-academic disciplinary structure Hynek originally established.

Eddie also takes an empirical approach. As one of the most skeptical participants I spoke to, he used his folkloric approach as an easy way to conduct research without having to take a position on what he thinks is behind the phenomenon. Discussing the notion of UFO evidence, Eddie suggested that physical evidence is the most prized of all: "And in that sense skeptics are right that the UFO basic data is far less than ideal. It is *something*—it's testimony, in many cases it's even eyewitness testimony, but it's still anecdotal testimony. It's not something that's usually backed up with anything." In such a way, Eddie established himself alongside Mark as highly empirical in his approach. Eddie's status as taking an empirical epistemic approach to the topic illustrates that the Dimension 6 spectrum does not fall along

methodological lines: Eddie is a humanist and a historical researcher, which, if the spectrum were to correspond exactly to method and the qualitative/quantitative divide, would indicate that he belonged on the experiential side. However, given his benchmark of skepticism, it is evident that he exists firmly in the empirical camp.

Harriet was consistently critical of American empirical ufology. She mentioned to me that one of the only ways to disseminate her research findings and her own extraterrestrial encounters is through UFO conferences in the U.S.: "...it's very difficult for people outside of the States to make headway. There are not a lot of conferences held outside the States. So you know, if you want to get some information out, they have to try and get into the States, and that's difficult." In her writings, she talks about how conferences tend to program researchers over witnesses or experiencers, which she considers to be counterproductive and exclusionary. Though she considers herself a researcher as well, Harriet classifies herself as an experiencer first and foremost. She spoke in our interviews about no longer wanting to be on the conference circuit in the U.S., preferring to speak at smaller group gatherings globally.

As an experiencer, it may seem that Harriet would align herself with the *New Age* approach to ufology, but both she and Sharon have been critical of it. From Harriet's writings:

The 'Star Child' theory and its related successors 'Indigo Children', 'Crystal Children', 'New Humans' etc, are examples of how researchers have successively claimed 'new' information, much of which has been derived from a variety of decades-old theories within the contact field (but also in mainstream science and psychology concerning a new type of human evolving as a result of radical new technology, behaviour, and natural selection, rather than alien intervention)...The tendency of some researchers to encourage almost anyone who has had paranormal experiences to believe they are a Star Kid, Star Seed, New Human or hybrid, etc, often without evidence of any kind has, as Robert Salas stated above, allowed people to "rush through this open door."

In this quote, Harriet indicates that it is not the theory of the "new human" that is itself problematic—rather, it is the notion that any and all people who have had strange experiences can claim this label. For her, it is a very specific *experiential* label that is rooted in her own personal encounters. She considers some researchers to be attempting to profit off of the New Age. The New Age aspect of ufology is not,

itself, new. Eddie situated the perspective within the history of ufology: "...there were other parts of ufology at that point, like the contactees. These were people who said that they saw beautiful, almost angelic looking space brothers, who came to save us from the nuclear threat, and convince us to become peaceful, and love our neighbors, and so forth. In other words, it was a new age religion." By the 1990s, the New Age had evolved into a different perspective, predicting that humanity was approaching a new, enlightened period, in which, in Sharon's words, "we're going to look at things from a new viewpoint."

Originally, I got in touch with Sharon because I found a piece she had written in 2014, in which she defended the value of the New Age perspective. In it, she equates the new age with femininity and the nuts-and-bolts perspective with masculinity. Her argument echoed Vuolanto and Kolehmainen's findings that there are hegemonic masculinities associated with skepticism.⁵⁵⁷ In the blog post, Sharon discussed the iconic book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*:

As Dr. John Gray states in his seminal book...life on Mars and Venus are quite different with the focus of both seeming to be opposite, but in truth are complimentary. Typically Martians (men) focus on things and objects which manifests in initiative, activity and power while Venusians (women) focus on people and feelings which manifests in stillness, receptivity (intuition) and insight. It would not be untrue to say that in the past the Martian focus on objects has taken precedence in Ufology keeping any advancement towards deriving any meaning from it. Even the name change by many UFO organizations to include the term UFO rather than the word alien is a reflection of the turn away from the Venusian focus on people or living beings. In truth, it would have served Ufology better if UFO organisations had included the term "Alien" in their titles. At least this would not have caused the same depotentiating effect as the term UFO which now diffuses what Ufology is really about, that is, extraterrestrial life not unidentified flying objects.

In this quote, Sharon aptly discusses the divide within ufology that I have labeled experiential and empirical. Experiential researchers like herself and Harriet are interested in people and "beings," whereas empirical researchers like Mark and Eddie concern themselves with what the UFO phenomenon actually is, be it extraterrestrial or earthly. She uses the terms "New Age" and "nuts-and-bolts," emphasizing that the New Age movement has been led by women. Sharon does not challenge the original framing of

⁵⁵⁷ Vuolanto and Kolehmainen, "Gendered Boundary-Work within the Finnish Skepticism Movement."

Gray's book, which is built on gender essentialism and echoes American conservative Evangelical notions of complementarianism.⁵⁵⁸

When I asked Sharon about the piece in our interview, she distanced herself from it. She told me that when she wrote the blog post, she was drawn to the New Age because it contained elements of spirituality (as mentioned earlier, Sharon also runs a near-death experiences group). Since then, she found that New Agers have gone too far and have begun to discredit UFO research. "Okay, let's just say a UFO case, right? a close encounter experience, and looking for corroborative information to someone's report. But then, the New Age cringe might then come in and say they must have had an experience with the Pleiadians or the Sirians. We can't prove that sort of thing. But it's, it's been a growing sort of, and slightly unbalanced, viewpoint that's been imposed into the research arena." For Sharon, the New Age has become "wishful thinking" and "unbalanced": "it has possibly done some damage to research. In that it's—there are more people now who are talking about things that are not so evidentially based." The New Age has impacted the way UFO research is perceived, making it look "flakier than it already was." Harriet has a similar perspective, suggesting that the New Age is "encroaching" on more serious research. Again from Harriet's writings: "These [New Age] elements de-focus serious research and inhibit public access to the legitimate, currently known facts of the phenomenon. Today, many current UFO contact researchers and communicators have almost entirely aligned themselves with the New Age community, and the uniqueness and complexity of bonafide, UFO-related contact data may eventually cease to exist in its purest forms." Here, Harriet expresses anxiety that experiencers tend to align themselves with the new age rather than research, which is what she aligns herself with. In her interview with me, she expressed something similar: "I like to look at the evidence that's being presented and decide for myself how credible that is, but yes, a lot of people making ridiculous claims these days has actually made it difficult for people putting out well-researched material." Sharon and Harriet are drawing boundaries around their

⁵⁵⁸Debra Bendel Daniels, "Evangelical Feminism: The Egalitarian-Complementarian Debate" (Ph.D., United States -- Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin - Madison, 2003), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/305297505/abstract/9861A26CA59B4AB4PQ/1>.

own kind of research, which is more expansive than the empirical work of the U.S.-based researchers I spoke with but less of a free-for-all than the New Age people who they view as polluting their vein of ufology.

Empirical ufologists also discussed the variety of factors that they see as polluting their modes of research. Discussing the early days of ufology, Eddie outlined two distinct camps:

[The New Age] was something that was popular with a certain group and they would have their conventions. It brought a lot of ridicule to the subject. And that was something that the so-called, the serious ufologists, more scientific ones, didn't like. So there was this kind of double, two sides to the thing. There was the religious "nut" group. And then there were the more serious ones who thought there was something material to study here. And there was, of course, plenty of in-between...

Eddie further described the current state of the field and the variety of *weirdnesses* that exist under the umbrella of UFO research: “So there's always been this weird side to ufology, lots of believers and that sort of thing. But there's also—there's still the scientific side as well.” Describing the “weird side” of ufology, Eddie cites factions of the UFO field who believe in reptilians and an alien base beneath a U.S. Air Force Base. Although they exist on different parts of the epistemic spectrum, Eddie, Harriet, and Sharon would likely agree that much of the new age and the “weird side” of ufology contaminate ufology as a whole.

Abductions are a gray area in empirical research: the very thing that sets experiential research apart (its faith and interest in witness testimony and personal experience) is contested by many empirical ufologists. In Eddie’s words:

...there was the business of UFO abductions where some very convincing people honestly thought they were being kidnapped by aliens, taken inside spaceships, given examinations. They'd be having something implanted in them, maybe having some genetic materials removed from them, and then turned loose, maybe to be abducted again in years to come. This became a very extensive area of research. And it became, it was a hard thing to refute in the usual terms. You couldn't say that they were just seeing balloons or airplanes or satellites. But it was very likely that there was a lot of mental influence here. Hypnosis became the tool for releasing a lot of those memories. But they were in fact, probably, hypnosis was probably a means of creating these memories, false memories. The UFO investigators were often not well-trained in the use of hypnosis, to do a lot of leading of the witness...Now there's some of them that are still convincing, like the Barney and Betty Hill case. It is very hard to dismiss that account. But many of the pieces that became well known in the UFO literature probably have something to do with these false memories that were planted in them. But this became another area of the UFO field

that convinced believers that there was something very serious going on. And that repelled the doubters that thought that there was any kind of scientific basis for any of this.

There were serious debates within American ufology regarding whether abduction research was a viable area of study. Some ufologists argued it was based too much on witness testimony and thus too experiential. Mark, who had himself conducted abductions research, expressed a similar view to Eddie:

In the abduction area you know, the original and even with UFO witnesses going back even further, the same thing was proposed—that there's something *wrong* with these people. But enough studies were done including, you know, even the one I did, that show that abductees, they're almost all regular people. They're just reporting these things. And so now, at least, the consensus view in the academic world is okay, they're regular people. And they're having sleep paralysis episodes and dissociation events, you know, that can happen to anybody, but they're not crazy, right? They're not lying, they're not hoaxing, they're not you know, they're... honestly reporting their experiences, but they're not out there. They can function—they're functional in society. No, but, you know, some people just have more dissociation in their life and whatever. And that's, that's what's causing this. And that's, at least that's an improvement from where they started. Of course, it's still a problem since those things don't explain you know, some abduction events where there's multiple people involved, like Allaghash case, in Maine, and all that, but in any case, you know, that's still the consensus viewpoint.

Eddie and Mark, who are both empirical in their approach, are skeptical of abductions, but they leave some space open for different explanations. Although Mark was skeptical of the extraterrestrial explanation of abductions, he continued to do a variety of research projects *on* abductees, as he mentions in this quotation. In Don's words, Mark recognized that “there's a there there” and continued doing research about abductees for that reason. Like UFOs in general, the empirical perspective on abductees seems to be that *something* is happening, but it is unclear if it is related directly to extraterrestrials. Both Eddie and Mark seem to think about and research abductions with detached credulity⁵⁵⁹—holding space for simultaneous belief and disbelief.

Both empirical and experiential researchers draw boundaries around their discipline. For many empirical researchers, reliable evidence does not include the testimony of experiencers who claim to have been on board extraterrestrial craft. For experiential researchers, this is the *thing*—the human experience—that is of interest. For both sets of ufologists, there are “less rigorous” UFO researchers who are bringing down the reputation of more serious researchers. Although it was not explicitly said, based

⁵⁵⁹ Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*, 28.

on Mark and Eddie's perspectives on abduction, empirical researchers might consider experiential researchers to be some of those UFO researchers who fall outside of the disciplinary boundaries they have drawn around their work. Consequently, Harriet feels excluded from empirical American ufology because of her status as an experiencer and her concomitant experiential-epistemic perspective. As for Don, he seems to be somewhere between the two categories, illustrating that it is not a binary, but a spectrum along which people can move. Prioritizing fieldwork above all else, Don is also evidently very interested in physical evidence (illustrated by his participation in archaeological digs at the Roswell crash site). He can ultimately be considered empirical-experiential.

Although this is a case study section focusing on ufology, I will briefly mention that some JFK assassination researchers draw similar boundaries around their discipline. Steve mentioned that there is a faction of "conspiratorial" JFK researchers who have their own conference:

I was reading this book by this woman, Judy Baker, who claims she was Oswald's girlfriend when he was working in New Orleans. And I read the first four chapters of her book, which were about her background. And then I got to the chapter where she meets Oswald and I was like, this is fiction. There's a change in the writing. I can tell that [the previous chapters] were authentic, and this is a lie. And the thing is, she is a big problem now, like in the community. There was massive upheaval in Dallas this last year because Oliver Stone was there and said he believes her, and she runs a rival conference...in the research community, the real researchers really, they view her with disdain because they feel like she's doing a disservice to history and to real research. And that's where the conspiracy theorists, who in the worst pejorative sense of that term flock for that conference. And it's just, it's a money making machine. And she tells stories and so more and more stories you have to wade through.

Like the ufologists, "serious" JFK researchers concerned with truth and history believe that Baker is damaging their cause and their wider reputation. Steve even uses the term "conspiracy theorist" pejoratively here to draw boundaries around his own work and illustrate why it is so difficult to have Kennedy assassination research taken seriously. This puts Steve in parallel with Eddie and Mark, indicating that he is an empirical researcher.

Both ufology and JFK research consider themselves underdogs of the research world. They are largely unfunded, have no institutional home, and tend to be widely ridiculed by the larger society and by science and scientists in particular. The following section discusses science and scientific expertise as it relates to counter-establishment research.

In contemporary society, we are called upon not only to trust documents, but to also trust individuals who may possess more knowledge than we do about a given subject, or *experts*. David Coady defines an expert as someone who is better informed about a specific domain than most other people. Just as Buckland argued that dependence on documents is growing,⁵⁶⁰ Coady suggests that dependence on experts is growing as a result of information explosion and topic specialization. Calling into question the usefulness of Enlightenment epistemology as Jane and Fleming do,⁵⁶¹ Coady concludes that it is no longer possible, “if indeed it ever was,” to create and maintain beliefs simply through personal scrutiny.⁵⁶² Yet, of course, this requires some measure of trust in experts, which is itself anxiety provoking. Don’t experts have more power than non-experts? And what is to stop them from abusing such power? How can we tell who is an expert and who isn’t? How can non-experts judge an expert’s credibility? “Deference requires trust, and trust implies a risk of deception and fraud.”⁵⁶³ Indeed, skepticism of scientists is not entirely unfounded: multiple high-level scientists spread claims that were in the best interests of private corporations and that challenged widespread scientific consensus. These included the proven notion that there was a connection between smoking tobacco and cancer, and that climate change is real and anthropogenic. These scientists, who were being paid by oil and gas companies, argued that volcanoes caused acid rain, that climate change was “natural variation,” and that humans would unquestionably be able to adapt to it.⁵⁶⁴ Fuller suggests that “...there may be an inherent tendency for expertise to become politicized.”⁵⁶⁵ Indeed, Coady cites the notion that relying on experts “can seem elitist, since it implies that some people’s opinions are more valuable than others.”⁵⁶⁶ Elitism and expertise are often grouped

⁵⁶⁰ Buckland, *Information and Society*.

⁵⁶¹ Jane and Fleming, *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid*.

⁵⁶² Coady, *What to Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues*, 28.

⁵⁶³ Johanna Hartelius, “Rhetorics of Expertise,” *Social Epistemology* 25, no. 3 (July 1, 2011): 211–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2011.578301>.

⁵⁶⁴ Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Climate Change*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2019).

⁵⁶⁵ Fuller, *Social Epistemology*, 204.

⁵⁶⁶ Coady, *What to Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues*, 31.

together rhetorically.⁵⁶⁷ Expertise is linked to power, and conspiracy theory is often expressly about speaking back to (perceived) power. Accordingly, many participants expressed skepticism towards the scientific establishment, perhaps in part because they were rejected by it. At the same time, in both empirical and experiential counter-establishment research, there is a reproduction of the values of science (positivism, expertise, status, etc.), often implemented as a means of legitimation. This creates a tension that shows up at a variety of points.

When speaking directly about science, the ufologists I spoke with seemed to have a generally negative or skeptical view of it as a whole. Talking about Pluto's downgrade from a planet to a dwarf planet, Don said, "...we keep learning that science is so un-absolute that it is so infantile, so primitive in its approach." Harriet and Sharon made similar statements about how our current scientific understandings are crude, especially when compared to extraterrestrial scientific knowledge. Sharon remarked that she thinks "...there's a whole lot of stuff going on, I think that if, you know, if we're if we're talking about extraterrestrials, which I think we are in, in quite a lot of cases, they are very advanced, their physics is way beyond ours their understanding of the fabric of reality is way beyond ours." Referencing the University of Colorado study, Eddie said: "So [the study] was just a complete lead for the ufologists. Who then had something to point to and say that okay, this obviously is not a cover-up, but it is certainly a travesty of science." Likewise, Harriet recalled: "...what was seen by the UFO researchers as a takeoff area where a craft had landed and then taken off over the tea tree bushes, and they were all basically cooked, microwaved, to ashes. They say that it was a fungus that had caused that. Well, we've never seen any fungus function like that at any other time, just that one occasion. [Laughs] So yeah, there's been a lot of whitewashing going on." She recalled another incident as well: "...we had disinformation [about a sighting] put out by the government and Department of Scientific Research and our astronomers, because

⁵⁶⁷ Mayer N. Zald and Michael Lounsbury, "The Wizards of Oz: Towards an Institutional Approach to Elites, Expertise and Command Posts," *Organization Studies* 31, no. 7 (July 1, 2010): 963–96, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840610373201>; John Scott, "Modes of Power and the Re-Conceptualization of Elites," *The Sociological Review* 56, no. 1_suppl (May 1, 2008): 25–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2008.00760.x>.

they had no explanation and they did not want to admit that to the nation.” Don, for similar reasons, stated that he still believes in science writ large, but has dwindling faith in scientists themselves.

Mark, whose doctoral degree is in the sociology of science, had a lot to say on the subject, especially the idea of scientific consensus:

...the naive thought years ago was that, yeah, if you don't believe in the scientific consensus, you're probably not that educated. That turns out not to be true. Same thing's, interestingly enough, also true about UFOs. People who believe in UFOs are not less educated than people who don't believe in UFOs. You know, education is not a key factor in...driving that belief or determining that belief. But getting back to the anti-vaccination thing, so there's another thing going on there...what factors are related to anti-vaccination belief, or, or belief in vaccination. They don't call it that, because that's the correct belief, quote, unquote. So typically, what what is *not* studied are those who go along with the scientific consensus. What—what *is* studied is those who *don't* go along with the scientific consensus.

Here, Mark is pointing out that those who go against the grain are pathologized, with “the grain” being determined according to scientific consensus: those who go along with the scientific consensus are *unmarked*, and those who refuse to, in whatever capacity, are *marked*.⁵⁶⁸ He brings in education as an example of a scientific finding, related to science, that has been overturned. This is consistent with my findings in this study: over half of the participants in this study held a master's degree or higher. Mark delved further into thinking through scientific consensus:

Okay, now, let me expand one more thing, which is: scientific consensus. So, again, let's use UFOs now—my area. So if you put a scientist in a room alone, and talk to them...and you were friendly, and you knew them, and you said, What do you think about UFOs? You would get a totally different overall distribution of responses than if you asked them in front of their colleagues what they thought about UFOs. In other words, the private attitudes of people about UFOs were different than their public attitudes. So is there a scientific consensus on UFOs? And the answer is: Yeah, elite science, you know, that data, elite institutions and the National Academy of Science, and etc, funding agencies. Yeah, the elite consensus is that, you know, UFOs are not only not alien spacecraft, but they're not worth studying. But there are a good number of scientists who don't believe that. Partly because they've had their own sightings, but partly because they, you know, study the evidence and know there's something going on, or maybe a family member had a sighting. But they can't, and won't say that publicly. Because if they do, they're going to be ostracized. And their careers may be damaged. So scientific consensus is a real thing. And generally, it's okay and fine. But it is a conservative thing in science. And it's a conservative thing in the old sense of conservative, you know, not a liberal versus conservative dichotomy in politics. But scientific consensus is conservative in that “we will conserve what is currently existing, we will not overturn the current order of things.” And what that means is that it is hard for a new theory to be accepted, typically, without very strong evidence.

⁵⁶⁸ Recalling Brekhus' *Culture and Cognition* as outlined in chapter 2.

Here, Mark makes a distinction between high-level scientific consensus, which posits that UFOs are not worth studying, and individual scientists, who may believe that UFOs are worth studying but who are not willing to put their reputations on the line. Scientists' status as such and the strict nature of scientific consensus means that any advocacy of the study of UFOs would *mark* them as a conspiracy theorist at worst and gullible at best. Ufology is forced to operate outside of science because of its status as a marked discipline, solidifying its status as a counter-establishment area of study.

A few participants also rejected what they viewed as scientific and academic elitism. In her writings, Harriet rejects the very notion of human expertise: "We are all still in the beginning stages of trying to understand what may be the most profound influence on the course of human civilization in the history of our existence. None of us are experts in this vast and complex subject." Just as she did not appreciate that ufological spaces were dominated by UFO researchers rather than communicators, she disapproves of any person claiming expertise in UFOs or ETs. Whereas Mark, a squarely empirical researcher, believes that expertise is achievable by interested researchers (if extremely difficult), Harriet, an experiential researcher, demonstrates her belief that any human who claims to be an expert in these topics is showing hubris, implying that the true experts are the extraterrestrials. Jon spoke about how "damaging" academic elitism can be, discussing how he felt ashamed of working at a university and sometimes did not want to tell people. He also spoke about how, over his years of teaching, he has started to respect scientists more than humanists, suggesting that science was more valuable than liberal arts. Despite holding a doctorate, Mark identifies as a "non-academic non-elite." Sharon described a kind of default position she holds as being skeptical of *all* institutional information: "...in the general population, people still believe what the doctors tell them, and the education system, and the history...and the government, etc." This is a classic *do your own research* kind of approach to our information ecosystem and illustrates an extreme kind of experiential attitude: to be experiential in evaluating information, you must experience and evaluate it yourself. Relying on (human) expertise is highly discouraged.

Despite the persistent skepticism towards science found among my participants, they often operationalized scientific concepts and used the language of science—discussing data, comparing their own work to academic work, and using support from scientists and academics as a way to illustrate the legitimacy of their work.⁵⁶⁹ Many participants also noted that they tried to be scientific or objective in their approaches. Discussing the reputation of CUFOS, Mark said, “the Center has always been the most scientific, most well-respected UFO group. With Hynek starting us, and all that.” He went on to discuss the relationship between the scientific establishment and CUFOS:

You know, when Carl Sagan had a famous saying that extraordinary claims require or demand extraordinary evidence, he was talking about UFOs: “...if you guys think these are alien spacecraft...that's an extraordinary claim. So you need extraordinary evidence.” And, you know, our response was, we're not saying they're alien spacecraft. You know, we're saying that they're an unexplained phenomena that deserves study. And so we're not making the claim you're actually saying.

In this quote, Mark contrasts the empirical with the experiential: Sagan *perceived* ufology as wholly experiential, in the sense that he assumed the entire discipline believed that extraterrestrials are behind the phenomenon. But Mark clarifies the CUFOS position as starkly empirical: Mark and his colleagues do not make any assumptions or posit any beliefs about what is behind the phenomenon; they merely wish to study it.

Harriet mentioned in both our interviews and her writings that she tries to be objective when interviewing: “I think to be objective and to gather important information and important points of view, you have to keep your own experiences and feelings out of it.” In her writings, she discusses the reputation of communicators: “...the false impression that communicators in general are not capable of analysing their experiences in an objective and intelligent way, is alive and well in the minds of some conference facilitators and the wider public; researchers are still deemed to be needed as some kind of ‘professional filter’ of data.” Harriet, like scores of people who have been researched, feels that she is herself capable of the analysis that researchers are performing, often *about* her. She is both a researcher

⁵⁶⁹ This language can be seen in how Harriet, Don, and Sharon discussed gathering their data in subsection II of this chapter.

and a communicator—according to her writings, this dual identity does not seem to fit easily within the larger landscape of ufology. Don, who stated that, in his work around Roswell, he and his team have tried to be “as scientific as possible,” defined science in terms of reproducibility: “...just because you demonstrated it, it has to be demonstrated not one more time, but a third time, before it's even considered as being legitimate. It's the same thing when we've had a potential laboratory analysis of a fragment, a piece from the crash site. Not only does it have to, you know, pass muster once, three separate times. And that's what science is.” Objectivity and reproducibility are integral to science, and these counter-establishment researchers laud them accordingly. Even experiential researchers like Harriet reify objectivity, although the experiential epistemic outlook derives from the sanctity of subjective human experience. Her reification of objectivity may be one way in which she enacts her role as a researcher.

Like Don, Eddie has also done some basic science research: “I do, sort of move into what might be called hard science territory with the, with the comparative studies that I've done recently. It's really not an area that I'm qualified to work in. But what I do is very basic, very simple. I think it's a you know, it's simply a rational way of looking at a subject that is otherwise not very well respected as something that can or should be rationally approached.” Ufology continues to be soundly rejected by the scientific establishment, so ufologists who want answers to scientific questions have to do the work themselves. Ufologists are essentially forced to *do their own research*. Indeed, Don positions Roswell as the most empirically accessible case in the UFO research canon: “So that's the wonderful thing about Roswell, that it's the most nuts-and-bolts UFO event of all time. Because again, we're not just talking about a fleeting image or a glimpse of something in a nighttime sky, or even a landing that may have left depressions in the ground. With Roswell, you're talking debris. You're talking about the remains of the craft...And you're talking about, based on both military and civilian testimony, a lone survivor. It wasn't liable. So talk about just the amount of documentation, photographs, film, everything, pertaining to just that one incident.” For Don, the fact that there are many different kinds of evidence pertaining to the Roswell incident indicates that it is the perfect topic for empirical research. Other scholars, including Mark, consider Roswell to have *too much* evidence, to be *too* picked over.

Many participants also used a variety of academic lingo to describe their work. Mark spoke repeatedly about “making a contribution” to the literature, a common academic term for adding to a specific, often highly specialized, area of knowledge. This constitutes one of his main motivations for research (Dimension 2). Other participants discussed “building on existing knowledge”—Felix, for example, discussed the difficulties inherent in research on the paranormal in general: “When it comes to the worlds of paranormal and spooky things, I would say that, you know, knowledge is a very scattered and fragmented thing, and there's not really a place that you can easily, you know, build upon stuff that's come before to sort of increase the knowledge as a whole.” When it comes to research on the paranormal, Felix was “filling in gaps” for himself, rather than building up collective knowledge. An empirical researcher, Felix’s motivations lie not in contribution to collective knowledge, but instead within developing personal understanding. He also contrasted this research to his academic research: “Cause like from my academic side of things, I wouldn't consider this research, but you know, I am accumulating, you know, information in my head about the things that I've read and seen and trying to at least put the pieces together, not producing any sort of scholarly output to go with it.” Felix’s concept of what counts as research is distinct because of his background in academia.

By contrast, Mark describes a variety of academic research and scholarly outputs he has produced in the course of his work at CUFOS. He told me in detail about two specific longitudinal research projects he conducted: one about abductees and one about “vehicle interference cases”:

I did my own project, my first project that I did, and I'm still very happy with the results. The people at that time we're looking at, we're concentrating on a particular *type* of report, Physical Trace Cases, cases where people see humanoids. And I decided to look at cases where people's cars were stopped by UFOs, called "vehicle interference cases." And nobody had really done that in depth. And so I started that actually in '76, and worked on it for several years, you know, Dr. Hynek looked over my shoulder. Basically, I had to do a *lot* of research and info gathering...you know, how do you find UFO cases? I wasn't going to investigate, I was going out to use the existing literature, of which there was a lot, because cases are published in UFO periodicals. But cases also exist in files. And the Center had quite extensive files, because of Dr. Hynek. And then there were other UFO groups as well, that I corresponded with, and...was able to get case copies of cases from them. So through a long process of information gathering, I put together a large database of these types of cases. And then I, you know, did an analysis and then I produced...you know, we'll call it a monograph about that, that the center published in '81.

The entire process Mark described is typical of academic research and would have been at home in a university setting. Both his methodology and the language he used indicated an academic approach: publishing a monograph, putting together a database, categorizing different types of close encounters: “physical trace cases,” “vehicle interference cases.” In a similar way, though in much less depth, Harriet described her areas of specialization: “alien technology that I've used and observed on craft” as well as “sightings that occur in [country] around the time of seismic and volcanic activity, which we have been documenting for years.” Although Harriet seems to be against expertise as a concept, she continually demonstrates that she herself possesses areas of specialization and expertise that she has cultivated over time. Thus, both experiential and empirical researchers develop areas of specialization.

Further, Harriet demonstrates that the approval of scientists and academics is integral to her pursuit of legitimacy in her areas of expertise, in particular her knowledge of extraterrestrial technology. She spoke about one of the most recent times she gave a speech, in which an attempt was made on her life: “Someone wanted to silence me about what I was talking about to do with the experience. But following that I had—immediately following my speech and in the months following, I had dozens of scientists contact me from all around the world who had seen a video of my speech, wanting to remain anonymous, but to corroborate some of the things I was saying.” Some of the scientists she had been contacted by stated that they were working on developing exactly the kind of technology that she had seen on board spacecraft. Getting more specific, Harriet stated that she spoke with “the astrophysicists to contribute to my book, and we've got astronomers and scientists, we've got the guy who trained the Russian cosmonauts...So I think they're—particularly retired scientists—are, they're coming out of the woodwork now, and actually coming to us and saying, look, this is all the research I've actually been privately doing, and I'm willing to share it with you.” Although she has these scientists supporting her, both publicly and privately, Harriet still struggles to get approval from wider ufological circles, because her work does not seem to be scientific or empirical enough. Mark, although he would likely be what Harriet considers the ufological establishment, expresses similar opinions about scientists and academics—see the block quote above. Sharon also listed scientists that were involved with her UFORA:

“three psychologists and a biological anthropologist.” Harriet expressed the hope that “a flood of scientists” would come forward once her country’s government admits to knowing more about extraterrestrial contact than they previously have admitted to. Sharon also suggested that academic interest in UFOs has spiked since the 2017 Navy pilot sightings: “Particularly, I have heard from an astronomer in the scientific and academic fields, there has been a huge interest since 2017 when the Pentagon officially released footage...taken by Navy pilots.” Scientists who align themselves with ufologists—in particular those who align those with an experiential approach, like Harriet—are lending their credibility while breaking with the scientific establishment. For ufologists, this break illustrates their trustworthiness, through their willingness to be operationalized as mechanisms for legitimacy.

While Mark painted a portrait of a dwindling UFO research landscape whose truest and most productive intellectual ferment took place in the 1970s and 1980s, Sharon described a UFO research landscape that seemed on the brink of something exciting:

But then through the decade of the '90s, we had a lot of people calling in with abduction reports, which was, a lot...more people these days are aware of it. And the numbers of reports just increased exponentially. Like we might have had forty reports in a year before that. But after that, I mean, the highest year was about ninety seven, I think, and we had 800 reports, I think, of sightings and close encounters. That changed things, in a lot of ways. People started asking, instead of just, you know, getting descriptions of the craft, now people wanted to know about who's driving them, you know, what are they like? What are *they* doing here? What's *their* agenda? And all that sort of stuff, so. And then, when scientists, about 2000 scientists changed their perspective. And they started saying publicly, you know, going from we're alone in the universe to, well, maybe there's life in the universe, to, well, there's probably life in the universe, to, well, actually, probably, we've never been alone. You know, so how much life is there out there? And then we had this emergence of the research field with exoplanets, which only came about around the same time. So that changed a lot for the public, because, you know, the public, the savvy public, like to think that they're scientifically acute, and they change their, what they would allow into their minds, to do that sort of thing...and, things have gone on from there. People are much more open about talking about UFOs now than they ever were.

For an experiential-empirical researcher like Sharon, witness reports and discussion amongst scientists are the most important metrics to measure the health of the research field. But for someone like Mark, who is squarely an empirical researcher, and who has also been active in the UFO research field for decades, the resources available and the number of interested, serious, empirical researchers are what indicates the health of the field.

Across the board in ufology, from the experiential to the empirical, science is reified in a variety of ways. Empirical researchers laud scientific methods, employing them in a variety of ways across research projects. Experiential researchers reify science when individual scientists are able to contribute credibility to their assertions. Like academic disciplines, historically rooted traditions have developed in the field of ufology: empirical American ufology grew out of Hynek's work, his scientific, nuts-and-bolts approach. For researchers working in other parts of the world, American empirical ufology appears to be the dominant vein of ufology. In attempting to be as scientific as possible, American empirical ufology often reproduces the dynamics of the wider scientific landscape. In the same way that science dismissed ufology as a whole, demarcating and dismissing it as pseudoscience, American empirical ufology often dismisses the experiential, labeling it as unscientific and unverifiable. Despite an awareness that it will always be a marked, quasi-discipline, American empirical ufology strives to be as scientific and unmarked as possible, marking other forms of ufology as a way to differentiate itself from them. Experiential research of the kind conducted by Sharon and Harriet then differentiates itself from other areas of UFO research, including veins of new age, marking those less credible areas of ufology as a way to carve out an area for *themselves* in which their experiential research will be taken seriously by both American empirical ufology and the wider scientific establishment.

That this ufological divide falls along gendered lines is significant, as well. Vuolanto and Kolehmainen point out that scholarship on gendered boundary-work is comparatively thin and that uncritically discussing gendered boundary work without an explicit rejection of the binary runs the risk of reproducing a binary model of gender. In my life and research practice, I reject a binary model of gender, however, the gendered boundary-work that I engage with in this project often explicitly reinforces binary conceptions of gender (see Sharon's blog post above on *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*). Science is often associated, explicitly and implicitly, with masculinity: according to an international 2015 study, science is still perceived widely as a male profession, perhaps because percentages of women

studying science are still lower in most places than men.⁵⁷⁰ Vuolanto and Kolehmainen state that this is the “most obvious form of gendered boundary-work,” which “marks a gender boundary since it contributes to an understanding of femininity as external to science.”⁵⁷¹ In their research, they also found that, in their data, research by women was questioned more often than research by men. The nature of experiential research lends itself more readily to being questioned due to a lack of hard evidence; it may seem even more questionable to American empirical ufologists because experiential ufology is being led by women.

Evidence: What Makes a Source Trustworthy?

I asked participants what kinds of resources or to constitute good evidence for the phenomenon or subject they were investigating. Archival scholar Geoffrey Yeo parses the differences between records and evidence, demonstrating that any number of things may serve as evidence but only a few of those things may be considered records in the archival sense.⁵⁷² Further,

As David Schum commented in 1994, we ‘use the term evidence with reference to observable phenomena upon which we base inferences about matters of interest and importance to us.’ Evidence can be employed to support action or decision making as well as to prove or refute claims and hypotheses. It can be used to draw new conclusions or corroborate an existing proposition. It can be a means of ascertaining whether a proposition is true, justifying a belief that it is true, explaining why it is true, or persuading an audience of its truth.

These functionalities of evidence, in particular the justification of belief and persuasion of belief, are the primary ways in which my participants used and spoke about evidence.

I asked participants how they evaluated evidence in general, and what they looked for in a source to consider it a trustworthy one. Mark gave the following example:

⁵⁷⁰ Rachel Bernstein, “Science Still Seen as Male Profession, According to International Study of Gender Bias,” 2015, <https://www.science.org/content/article/science-still-seen-male-profession-according-international-study-gender-bias>.

⁵⁷¹ Vuolanto and Kolehmainen, “Gendered Boundary-Work within the Finnish Skepticism Movement.”

⁵⁷² Geoffrey Yeo, “Concepts of Record (1): Evidence, Information, and Persistent Representations,” *The American Archivist* 70, no. Fall/Winter 2007 (2007): 315–45.

...so they, they release stuff, they say things, they do things, you know, this the TTSA [Tom Delong's To the Stars] and associated, and you have to say, "Do I trust what they're saying? Do I believe what they're saying? So there's a lot of that that goes on in the UFO community. Meaning you have to assess the source of the information. And of course, we do this in life in general you know, if there's a story on a network you trust or don't trust, right, you judge it accordingly. So, the same thing is true in UFOs but even *more so*. Because there is such a wide variety of sources.

Here, Mark compares evaluating the trustworthiness of news stories with evaluating the trustworthiness of a UFO-related source. With UFOs, however, there are so many different kinds of evidence and so many different sources that it becomes difficult to determine what might serve as trustworthy and reliable evidence. Other participants discussed how they evaluate evidence as well. A couple of less-serious researchers mentioned that presentation matters to them. For Inez,

A lot of it is presentation. I mean, I think, you know, again, like, doing hair made me really super, super observant of people's hidden cues and signals. I've also worked in marketing, sales, and I just, I can usually tell when I'm being sold something, you know what I mean? Or when...if something feels like it's trying too hard to convince me. That makes me suspicious. You know what I mean? I think that—maybe this is just me just simply judging a book by its cover—but the more serious the presentation is, the more coherent the presentation is, the more likely I am to take it seriously.

Inez trusts evidence that is coherent and concise. When reading firsthand accounts of paranormal encounters online, Jesse is also concerned with presentation: "...a lot of [the stories] are pretty entertaining. But that is also kind of like a tip off that it's not true. It's like you're reading a narrative that's like that a writer has written, like, filled with purple prose and like really poetic, really flowy language, it's like you're reading the work of a professional. And that's, that's kind of a tip off to me, that that's like some aspiring author maybe practicing or to see if their work is believable." Professional or well-thought out writing indicates a lack of authenticity for Jesse, whereas for Inez, it indicates a passion for the subject and a respect for the reader or viewer. Both of these participants are associated with Missing 411—this contrast cements the extraordinary diversity of approaches even within a small sample size of more casual researchers. Further, the fact that style matters to both Jesse and Inez when it comes to evaluating sources indicates that they are both at least somewhat experiential in their epistemic approach.

A few other participants mentioned the importance of instincts or feelings when evaluating evidence—either their own, or those they perceived in others. For Felix, hearing emotion in the voices of

people giving firsthand accounts indicates their truthfulness: “A certain degree of emotion...feels like it would be harder to fake. I think I mentioned the like terror aspects when they're experiencing something and they're like choking up as they're telling the story, you know? Sure. You could fake choking up but what do they have to gain from that?” Like Jesse and Inez, Felix is attempting to evaluate authenticity through measuring emotion in witnesses’ voices. Felix exists somewhere between the empirical and the experiential on the spectrum of Dimension 6: he always wants better data than exists for paranormal topics, so he evaluates what he can, given the data he has.

Don related the feelings he experienced when visiting the Roswell crash site for the first time, contrasting them with what he experienced at the Sixth Floor Museum: “And it was like, again, like I mentioned, being at the Roswell debris field, the crash site for the first time. And a thousand ghosts, the exact same feeling. I did not have that feeling in the Book Depository Building, on the sixth floor. I didn't have that impression like I was...where Oswald fired the shots. But down on the ground, and especially being on the grassy knoll, I had, again, they would say, the ‘spidey instinct,’ you know?” Don’s instincts seem to tell him that Oswald was in fact not in the Texas Schoolbook Depository, and that one or more shooters were situated on the grassy knoll. This trust in his own instincts and the feelings that come up for him when he was in the space of the assassination indicate that Don is not squarely empirical in his approach: he exists somewhere between the empirical and the experiential.

When speaking with witnesses, Harriet also listens to her instincts, watching for certain “indicators and triggers” that reveal whether or not a given person is being truthful: “I look—but having been in this for so long. I know what to listen for, and there are a lot of little triggers and points and indicators that I listen for that I've spoken to hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people over the years. And in that time, you gain quite an understanding of the underlying things that experiencers say, the little indicators and triggers.” Part of these indicators and triggers, for people who claim to have been on board extraterrestrial craft, is a kind of feeling of affinity or instant closeness. She described *not* feeling that with certain types of people who claim to be in close contact with extraterrestrials; “So it's a difficult one because I get people coming to me saying, ‘oh my ET guide told me this last night, and they

came and sat on the couch and talked to me.’ It’s very difficult to deal with someone who’s telling you that, and they can give you very, very few other details, except that they had a warm, fuzzy feeling. There’s no detail there. I don’t feel any of the triggers or the closeness or the affinity.” Feelings of kinship are important to Harriet and are operational in her willingness to believe other witnesses who claim stories similar to her own. This reliance on her own affective evaluations indicates her enduring, experiential-epistemic approach.

For Steve, context also matters when evaluating evidence: “If you don’t know the full context of it, like the fingerprints on Oswald’s rifle...if, when you go by the evidence and the documents look pretty clean cut, then you find out how those things got there and the timeline. And suddenly you’re like, well, I can’t trust that.” Context is particularly important for JFK assassination research, which contains so many different actors all along the timeline of events. Closeness to the source also matters—firsthand, eyewitness accounts are the most valuable, according to multiple participants from across the epistemology spectrum (Felix, Harriet, and Don). Discussing all the mountains of work that has been done on the JFK assassination, Steve suggested that the first things that were written in the wake of the assassination are likely the most trustworthy: “...that’s why the first generation of stuff is still sort of the most relevant, I think, before... [Pause] the farther away you get, the more the story has just become more elaborate and is less linked to, you know, documentation. And documentation also can be manipulative and point you in the wrong direction.” Steve’s fastidiousness when it comes to reliability of sources, details, and context clues indicates that he approaches his work with an empirical mindset.

We also discussed several different types of evidence: documentary, physical, video and photographic, and witness testimony. Many participants indicated that they are skeptical of documentary evidence unless it is corroborated by another form of evidence. Inez worried that too many people take the written word at face value, and Mark intimated that government documents themselves must be examined and evaluated for trustworthiness. Felix stated more than once that he does not put a lot of stock in archival records, particularly newspaper records: “just because something’s old doesn’t mean it’s true.”

By contrast, when discussing one particular incident from the 17th century, Eddie described the story as well as the reasons he trusted the documents it was based on:

One particular [incident] in Robozero Russia in 1663, where this gigantic spherical object, trailing fire, passed over this town of Robozero, flew by, turned around, came back, went out of sight again, came back a third time, hovered over the lake for forty-five minutes. It was quite enormous, it was supposed to be the size of...today, it would be a thirteen-story building. And it was fiery. And it was so hot that when people tried to go close to it, they had to turn back with all the heat...It turned out to be a very public case, it was recorded in a letter to [a] monastery, which was printed in the 1840s in the Russian Historical Society collection. So it's not a fake.

By “not a fake,” Eddie is referring to the fact that the incident itself took place—it could have itself been faked, but its historical presence was confirmed through documents, specifically a letter. Similarly, Bill spoke about how he proves his own beliefs about the Kennedy case through documentary evidence:

“...my belief, which I can prove with documents, is that I know that Oswald was an FBI source. And I know that because he, when he was in jail, asked to be interviewed by FBI agents. [laughs] That's the definition of a source! This is all in black and white.” That it’s “all in black and white,” recorded in the written record, is operative for Bill’s hypothesis that Oswald was an FBI source. Eddie and Bill used archival records the most often and displayed the most trust in them. Both researchers are squarely empirical.

Steve worked most often with documents and secondary-source monographs. When asked what makes a source trustworthy for him, he stated: “It's how [authors] present. Like it's either...for documents, it's: is this something I can corroborate? And then for authors, it's: How are they proving what they're saying? And are they, do they come across as rational beings?” Although not discussing instinct in the same way that Harriet was, Steve did rely on his impression of whether or not an author seemed rational. He also repeatedly spoke about checking footnotes in monographs as a way to gauge the authors’ trustworthiness. Likewise, Bill relied on footnotes to go more in-depth: “...once you get a solid footing with authors that you respect, start reading the footnotes. Start reading the primary documents and eliminate the middle person.” Cyril also mentioned wanting to know the sources and references when it came to legal evidence.

Participants, particularly UFO researchers, also spoke about the value of physical evidence. Don discussed the physicality of Roswell at length: “So that's the wonderful thing about Roswell, that it's the most nuts-and-bolts UFO event of all time. Because again, we're not just talking about a fleeting image or a glimpse of something in a nighttime sky, or even a landing that may have left depressions in the ground. With Roswell, you're talking debris. You're talking about the remains of the craft...” Mark also emphasized the importance of physical evidence with respect to UFOs in general: “So those are harder evidence, and UFOs are no different. Because, you know, UFOs are out there, you know, we are not somehow generating UFOs ourselves in some weird way, you know, UFOs exist independently of us. They're a physical phenomena. And so, and so therefore, you want to measure things about their physical characteristics. And so that's the best evidence to have. And, which is why, we try on our own—in our own poor way to do that.” At another point in our interview, he uses the example of ball lightning to illustrate his point: “But if you and I instead are studying, let's say, ball lightning, let me use that example again, and we get people's accounts of that, that's great. It is great, it's interesting. But if I'm a physicist, and I'm trying to develop a model, to predict it, I would much rather have, you know, evidence, a direct measurement of its temperature, for example, or a very good measurement of its size from a photograph rather than a witness testimony.” This is perhaps the most illustrative quotation from any interview I have done of a strictly empirical epistemology: Mark uses an example of a scientific mystery to illustrate that, for him, almost any form of evidence is more reliable than witness testimony. Some JFK researchers also discussed physical evidence; in particular, Cyril discussed the key missing piece of physical evidence in the case, the brain.

Most UFO researchers considered video and photographic evidence to be less than ideal. For Harriet, any video or photographic evidence that shows up on social media is inherently less trustworthy. Like his attitude towards archival documents, Felix mentioned that he does not trust archival video footage: “I mean, there's plenty of old newsreels that have totally nonsensical things in them too. So I wouldn't necessarily believe that to be God's honest truth either.” Sharon stated that, “These days, video footage is—I don't hold it as evidence because it's just so easily manipulated.” Similarly, Harriet said that

“...video and photographic evidence these days is a difficult one, because we're CGI and people are able to produce all kinds of things that are very convincing,” and Eddie opined that “...even photography now, everything is so easily faked that you don't know what you're getting unless you can trust the source itself.” Felix, while he felt that “video evidence is always nice,” maintained skepticism about it as well: “But the thing that I found myself saying when, you know, watching a show and there's like a ghostly sort of apparition or whatever or like something moves off a table without anyone touching it. The thing that I always come back to is either this is a hoax or something spooky is going on. Like, those are your only two real explanations when certain things are happening.” Empirical in his approach, Felix narrows down explanations of a paranormal event in a specific context to one of two possibilities.

Noting that there has been some UFO evidence picked up by radar and other scientific instruments, Mark conceded that “99.99% of the evidence is witness evidence. But it's very powerful witness evidence with multiple witnesses and other things. And you know, in very close cases where people could not misperceive anything...” Participants used a variety of methods to evaluate whether a witness account was trustworthy. As mentioned above, Harriet used her instincts to tell her whether someone was telling the truth. Felix analyzed witness statements according to context: “When it comes to story-based things you know, there's sort of a, like, does this person have anything to gain from telling this story in the way that they are?” He also mentioned that changes in witness behavior make witness stories more believable for him:

And then from there like descriptions of behavior that this has affected is also one of those things that tends to be fairly compelling to me. So like, if you say like, you know, I went hunting every year from fourteen to twenty two, I had this [paranormal] experience and I've never been hunting since like, that's like, sure you could be lying, but, you know, with all the other pieces of information that at least says like, Hey, there's at least something a little more believable here.

Having done his own academic work on emotions, Felix looked for behavioral and emotional indicators in witness testimony that could indicate whether or not a witness is telling the truth: “you know, if they feel too rehearsed in whatever it is that they're doing, if [I] feel like their story doesn't add up, or if there's like parts of it that feel made up for other reasons...”

For many participants, witness accounts were made more valuable if witnesses were either credible, there was corroboration of the story from other people or by other means, or both. What makes a “credible” witness? Air traffic controllers, pilots, and military personnel are widely considered to be highly credible witnesses to UFO activity specifically. Harriet told me that the profile of her research organization was raised because they published an air traffic controller sighting: “...one of our staff was an air traffic controller. And when we put out his sighting that he had from the control tower, it was given a huge credibility. And it really raised the credibility of our network that he was working for us and that he had a sighting.” Harriet emphasized repeatedly that her organization prefers military and other kinds of high-profile eyewitnesses. While this may seem to complicate her status as an experiential researcher, it bears noting that such highly credible witnesses are not convincing her; rather, this is evidence that is used to convince others of the truths of extraterrestrial visitation that she knows from personal experience.

By contrast, empirical researchers (Mark, Eddie, etc.) are trying to investigate and find evidence that would prove to *themselves* that they believe in the extraterrestrial nature of the phenomenon. This is an important duality between experiential and empirical, when it comes to UFOs at least. Experiential researchers are trying to convince both empirical ufologists and the wider world of the extraterrestrial nature of the phenomenon. In contrast, credibility and corroboration matter for Steve (an empirical researcher) as he evaluates evidence for *himself*, rather than trying to convince others: “I have to do a little speculation and do it in a responsible, reasonable way that is actually based on facts or if not facts, just testimony—responsible testimony though, just because someone tells a story, it doesn't mean it's true. But if there's enough corroborating, other stories that sort of fit in...” Empirical in his approach, Steve puts stock in what witnesses say, but only if they meet multiple kinds of criteria (trustworthiness, corroborating someone else’s story, etc.). At least when it comes to ufology, experiential researchers use evidence to convince others of the truth; empirical researchers use evidence to build a convincing case for themselves *and* others.

The strongest kind of evidence cited by participants, beyond physical evidence, is corroborating evidence—that which confirms another kind of evidence. Don went so far as to fantasize about a witness

showing him physical evidence of the crash at Roswell: "...if I had a single witness take me aside and take me maybe up to the attic and open up a footlocker, and open up a box, and there would be this piece of metal, and they'd allow me to hold it. And I'd squeeze it, crunch it up..." He described feeling elated at such a prospect. He also contradicted himself somewhat at another point in our interview, seeming to claim that he *does* possess the type of physical evidence from his archaeological digs that unequivocally confirms the statements of Roswell witnesses: "So we utilize some of the most sophisticated technology we have, and it all continues to demonstrate that the only thing that ever crashed out there was what—it was exactly what the eyewitnesses described. That this was something that was...a craft of unknown origin. And it was not a weather balloon. It was not a plane. It was not a rocket. And so once again, the eyewitnesses are telling us the truth." Don repeatedly cites the truth of the eyewitness statements he gathered and published in his books, by pointing to scientific, physical evidence that corroborates their statements.

Participants described evidence as it functioned in a variety of ways: either for their own edification and understanding, for them to prove their beliefs to the outside world, or both. As would be expected, empirical researchers tended to value physical evidence over witness evidence, and experiential researchers had to work within this framework in their attempts to justify and prove their own beliefs through corroboration and presentation of credible witness reports.

Unknowledge

Counter-establishment areas of research are subjugated knowledges in a very particular sense: their subjugated status comes from the fact that they are built on areas of enduring mystery, an area of *unknowledge*, rather than the notion that they are knowledges held by people who have been oppressed or marginalized. To a certain extent, this depoliticizes this particular kind of subjugated knowledge. Unknowledge can be defined as knowledge of an absence: knowledge that a piece of data or evidence exists, has existed, or should exist, but not having access to it; awareness that a silence, archival or otherwise, exists and is itself having effects on the world. Counter-establishment topics are subjugated

knowledges *because* they deal in mystery and unknowledge: in Mark's words, "the whole system is set up, not to think it's a mystery...people are not set up, institutions are not set up to treat things as mysteries." Often, the gaps left by unknowledge are themselves operationalized into infrastructures of belief. The Dimension 6, empirical-experiential spectrum is of course at play here, with complex results. What, for example, is the role of belief in the spaces left by unknowledge? For Luhmann, "...the observation that people have different patterns of reasoning—system one and system two, Kahneman and Tversky called them, or thinking fast and slow...should not only tell us that there is a difference between the plausibility of an idea and sustained commitment to that idea, but also to remind us that belief is not one kind of thing. People have all sorts of ideas they call beliefs."⁵⁷³ To hold belief in an area of knowledge, in particular one that is suffused with unknowledge and silences, is not, itself, either experiential or empirical. According to Coady, "On the face of it, our beliefs are determined, not only by our evidence, but also by the attitude we adopt towards that evidence. Hence, on the face of it, we can exercise control over our beliefs, not only by controlling our evidence-gathering activities, but also by choosing to adopt one rather than another attitude towards the evidence we end up with."⁵⁷⁴ This also holds true for silences and areas of unknowledge: belief functions according to how researchers choose to react to, and thus operationalize, silences and areas of unknowledge in the course of their research. They can acknowledge them as silences and move on, or they can interpret them, creating evidentiary or archival imaginaries that function in their own right as a kind of research finding.

Disinformation, archival silences, enduring mysteries—these are all forms of unknowledge that operate at different scales and in different ways. Unknowledge often has a concrete effect on the world as it is *operationalized* by notions of imagined records, archival imaginaries, and evidentiary imaginaries. I differentiate here between archival and evidentiary silences and imaginaries in the sense that Yeo differentiates between archival evidence and non-archival evidence. I will elaborate on this below. The

⁵⁷³ Luhmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*.

⁵⁷⁴ Coady, *What to Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues*.

ways in which participants react to unknowledge will also provide insight into their position on the Dimension 6 spectrum.

Disinformation

Although I did not directly ask about it, issues of information quality came up in discussion throughout my interviews: bad information and research, good information and research, and how to differentiate between the two. What constituted *bad* information for many participants? Mainly this was misinformation: hoaxes, disinformation, and poor-quality research. Hoaxes are, of course, a mainstay of UFO and paranormal lore. Harriet cited hoaxing as one reason she considers evidence on social media to be less trustworthy. According to Eddie, prior to Roswell, most reports of crashed extraterrestrial craft were hoaxes. Disinformation was mentioned by multiple interviewees—Bill, especially, spoke at length about the disinformation in the JFK assassination case:

And so what's happened, especially since the killing of a president, which was a terrible event, like 9/11...we've got...just a wave of disinformation around what happened and around similar events that impact our national security as they see it—not as I see it—but as they see it. And so with this wave of disinformation—and this is common practice, it is not rocket science, you can read almost any book on counter-intelligence and they'll tell you, this is how it's done—but these are very important national security issues. And so as a result, this is how it—conspiracy theory, in my opinion was the need for the state to be able to protect itself. And the way they do it is by marginalizing and demeaning their opposition.

Here, Bill draws a line between the disinformation around the Kennedy assassination (including rumors that Oswald was an FBI informant) and the development of the archetype of the pathologized conspiracy theorist. The pathologization of conspiracy theory becomes one tool the state uses to quell legitimate critique. In fact, Bill described his next book as being about bad information in general and disinformation in particular: “My next book is going to be about not only uninformed speculation, but more importantly, disinformation that's been shoved into this case by our adversaries.” For Bill, the disinformation that has been propagated by a variety of actors, especially the federal government, has hindered serious research into the JFK assassination for decades.

Elaborating, Bill described the disinformation around Oswald in particular: “this is the way to make sure a story is not told properly to the American public for fifty-seven years. If you erase by a clever pattern the evidence that ties Oswald as a source to these agencies then you've really accomplished your purpose...[a TV studio stated that]...Our policy is that we follow the dictates of the Warren Commission. We're like, okay. So this is like saying in 1963, that we're following the dictates of what the State Department told us about the Russo-Japanese War before World War One. Would they do that? And the answer is no, they wouldn't do that, but would they do that around the Warren Commission? And the answer is yes, because this stuff is kind of like customer policy with the United States. It's part of our history...part of the mythos of the United States.” Bill indicates here that the Warren Commission’s official story has become so entrenched in the United States that it has become an immovable policy, even in supposedly apolitical contexts such as the entertainment industry. Bill’s frustration with this was palpable, but he also seemed resigned to it. His research motivation, again, was to speak back to power. While he is passionate about his beliefs around the Kennedy assassination, he does not hold strong beliefs about who exactly killed Kennedy: only that, for instance, Oswald was an FBI source. This demonstrates his empirical epistemic approach.

Harriet and Sharon take a similar view of disinformation, asserting that it comes from the government as well as from fellow researchers. I asked Harriet directly about Roswell, and she responded with skepticism that the questions around Roswell could ever be answered:

Well, you know, it's a bit like the Rendlesham Forest one in the UK or Kaikoura Lights in New Zealand. It's an unknown quantity. And there's been so much disinformation put out there, that it's it all these decades later. It's very, very difficult now, and you know, people have died in the meantime, and are we ever going to find the answers? Should we just put it down to an interesting mystery and concentrate on the really good, high-credibility sightings, evidential sightings that are happening now?

Here, Harriet illustrates that she is an experiential researcher who sometimes works within an empirical framework, again because she is attempting to convince others of the reality of extraterrestrial visitation and contact. For her purposes, it makes more sense to concentrate on current sightings and experiences rather than historical ones, which she does not seem to think can ever be solved due to the multitudes of

silences within them. This is in stark contrast with what Don has said about Roswell: that it is a comparatively recent event, and therefore easier to study (at least when compared to other, more ancient anthropological eras). Harriet also discusses disinformation as it derives from fellow researchers, specifically in the U.S.: “And there seems to have been a massive generated campaign in the states to make all contacts look extremely negative, dangerous and threatening to humanity.” As someone who has had positive contact experiences, this narrative is inaccurate to her experience, and she feels it does not accurately reflect a large proportion of others’ ET experiences, as well. In her writings, she also quoted another researcher:

Robert Salas also raised issues of disinformation, contamination, infiltration, and manipulation... “There is no question in my mind that an international secret group that I call ‘The UFO Cabal’ is working diligently to insure [*sic*] that the UFO community is dysfunctional, ineffective, and in disarray. With the (intentional and/or unintentional) help of some individuals within the community, they are definitely succeeding. As in the past, agents of the Cabal have infiltrated groups, associations and organisations within the UFO community...”

Harriet also alleged in her interview with me that disinformation can come from researchers who want to be well known and famous. Sharon also talked about disinformation from the government and from “professional debunkers.” The government, according to Sharon, tries to take researchers down different paths: “I think there's also been some drip feeding [of information], too, because research has been slow....” As for professional debunkers, Sharon asserted:

They are paid to do what they do, to sow seeds of doubt...[one witness said that]...that was his job when he was in the military, to sow seeds, be around people who are having discussions, maybe go to conferences and things like that, and then sow seeds of doubt about things which is so easy to do when you don't have all the information and you're trying to put pieces together and to—so that people will not follow a particular avenue of inquiry. So I think that's a really interesting proposed component of research as well. So it behooves researchers who hear information to not then run around quickly and blab about it.

Here, Sharon alleges that people are paid by the government to debunk UFO reports, citing someone she spoke to who claimed to have done that for the military. Because of this, she cautions other researchers to be careful about what information they believe and spread. The notion of a “paid debunker” recalls “crisis

actor theories,” a type of conspiracy theory that purports the existence of paid actors who manipulate public perception of tragic events. These theories can be extremely harmful and destructive.⁵⁷⁵

Harriet and Sharon’s skepticism of other researchers surfaces repeatedly and speaks to their experiential epistemic approach. How could researchers claim to be experts in the UFO field when they have not even spoken to an extraterrestrial, as Harriet has? Harriet’s lack of respect for most (male, American) UFO researchers may also stem from feeling dismissed and rejected by them, just as these researchers’ lack of respect for the scientific establishment may stem from their *own* rejection and dismissal.

Encountering Silences

Recalling Gilliland and Caswell’s notions of the *imagined record* and *impossible archival imaginary*,⁵⁷⁶ and Trouillot’s *archival silences*,⁵⁷⁷ I am introducing the idea of an *evidentiary silence*, which exists outside of the archival realm, but within researched topics or subjects. I am referring to these as “evidentiary silences,” and their concomitant imaginaries as “evidentiary imaginaries” and “imagined evidence,” according to the frameworks laid out above. I am differentiating evidentiary versions of these archival concepts to emphasize that they do not exist within an archival context. The silences created outside of such a framework may not have the same kind of permanence as their archival equivalents, nor may they function according to the same level of state- or institutionally sponsored power. However, silences still tend to produce imaginaries, even absent the context of an archive. Indeed, silences abound within the three counter-establishment areas of research, as they are attempting to research and understand Foucault’s *inaccessible domain of nothingness*, dealing in the mysterious, the ephemeral, and the difficult-to-measure. In such a way, the ways in which researchers deal with the many silences they

⁵⁷⁵ Michael J. Wood, “Has the Internet Been Good for Conspiracy Theorising?” 2013.

⁵⁷⁶ Gilliland and Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined.”

⁵⁷⁷ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*.

encounter in the course of their research reveals a significant amount about their epistemic approach.

Creating imaginaries, archival or evidentiary, can be a way to speak back to the silences left by a vacuum of power.

Cyril is known within the JFK assassination research landscape as *the* civilian who discovered that Kennedy's brain was missing. Discovering a massive *archival silence*—for indeed, the autopsy records were preserved and housed in the National Archives—he described his thoughts:

So what did I think about it is very clear to me then as it is today, the brain was not examined, because if it had been sectioned, and examined, you would have seen haemorrhagic tracks, going through the [tissue], showing a bullet from the rear and the bullet from the front. That's why it wasn't examined. There's no question about it. Unbelievable. And you know, if this work, a murder case involving somebody important to me, next door neighbor, the guy on the street, ...and the forensic pathologist who did the autopsy would come in, and he was, you know, the brain in part different than say, I didn't do the shooting or I wasn't there or there was somebody else or whatever that case, believe me to check this out with any criminal trial attorney, that case will most likely be thrown out. Most likely, the judge would say that you have destroyed key evidence, it's not possible for the defendant to properly present his defense and throwing the case out, at the very least at the very least, it will be labeled as an official doctrine in law known as spoliation of evidence.

Kennedy's brain is a missing record, creating a massive archival silence that would prove to be a very powerful foundation for archival imaginaries in counter-establishment veins of research around the assassination. Cyril, who discovered the silence and made it public, imagines the brain-as-record, which shows two shots coming from different places, and thus more than one gunman. He also considers this to have been an entirely different result than he would have had were he not dealing with the death of a president. We must remember, too, Cyril's demonstrated expertise in forensic science; he is not only familiar with the scientific methods of forensics, but he is also deeply aware of legal procedure. He spoke on that specifically: "Ironically, I was the one that conducted those investigations. There's no way in the world that we ever had a case involving brain damage or whatever, that we would not have examined [the brain]." His professional expertise and his *status* as a professional with relevant expertise drew attention to the silence created by Kennedy's missing brain. Cyril's epistemic approach is empirical-experiential: in this particular case, he relies on his own expertise as a forensic pathologist to establish what is standard procedure in contexts where a brain is examined. At the same time, the expertise he has amassed is itself

scientific. He exists therefore somewhere between the empirical and the experiential; his experiential aspects deriving from the intensity with which he clings to the evidentiary imaginary of Kennedy's missing brain.

For some participants, a lack of data was a hindrance to their research, and for others, it prevented them from doing research entirely. Bill described how silences have hindered his research, recalling how certain media had disappeared: “[Oswald] was not a nut and he was not a loner. And it appears that we hear his voice on a couple tapes, or at least we read his voice, but the tapes have disappeared...And we know that [they] existed after the assassination, we have a paper trail. And they still disappeared. Two of the guys from the Warren Commission even got to hear them, but because they assumed they were true, they never tried to compare Oswald's voice.” The silence exists in this circumstance because the original record had been destroyed before it was assessed adequately as evidence. The only remaining record is a record *of the original record*, the veracity of which is now impossible to assess. Bill also talked about JFK assassination researchers, even after the mass declassification of 2017, still not having access to “some of the best documents,” in part because “[the government] just won't cough it up.” Mark also talked about the unlikelihood of a complete *lack* of records around Roswell: “And we know there's no paperwork whatsoever on it that anybody's ever found, which, by the way, is its own mystery. Because even if the military completely screwed up, and did misidentify something, you think there'd be some record of that somewhere. And the amazing thing is, there's no record of anything, anywhere.” Steve also discussed silences within government archives, implying that when records are lost, they are, in reality, classified: “... the things that are sealed off the, ‘Oh, no, we can't find that box. Oh, it's disappeared.” Referencing the 2017 release, Steve described a frustrating instance of redaction: “what we know in some cases...it's been withheld where like, in the recent release of documents from a couple of years ago, there was a report of some anti-Castro operatives in Dallas talking about like, ‘Oh, they have a problem with JFK. Somebody should...’ and then like the next eight pages are blank.” Steve also recounted instances relating to Oswald in which there is a dearth of information, including “the last couple of weeks in Dallas,” and his military intelligence records. He expressed uncertainty about whether the former was

destroyed or merely lost or not kept but did express certainty that the latter group of records was destroyed. Describing such archival silences and others, including the lack of proof that Oswald was being paid by the FBI (missing tax records), Steve said: "...so it's the holes. You look at the holes and you say, why is there a hole?" This recalls Bill's reference to Peter Dale Scott's notion of "the negative templates" which are, in Bill's words, "certain area[s] of evidence [that have] a black hole around [them]." Both Bill and Steve address silences as productive areas for further research: what could have caused the demonstrated silences within the JFK assassination story? For Cyril, Steve, Mark, and Bill, archival silences often indicate that the government has covered something up, in particular in circumstances where protocol or best practices of government archives were not adequately followed. The government has a pattern of archival secrecy, so this conclusion makes a certain amount of sense.

While government documents are likely one of the most prominent sites of silences within counter-establishment research, participants also spoke generally about data and information. Steve spoke about his frustration that there is not a central hub for information around the Kennedy assassination. Bill also described being unwilling to conduct JFK assassination research in college because he considered the case to not have enough "data points." The most significant silence in the Missing 411 canon is the lack of a central database that tracks people who go missing in the American wilderness. Felix described this frustration about Missing 411 and paranormal research in general, noting that the difficulties inherent in locating reliable information for paranormal research is prohibitive; that he will often search for something online and find only one or two results related to it. For Felix, Jon, and the young Bill, lack of available data prevented them from doing the kind and caliber of research they wanted to do.

Both Sharon and Inez recognized that their instinct in reacting to silences is to fill them with their own thoughts. Inez speculated: "I think that's really where a lot of the problems are, is when there isn't anything to verify, you know, because if there isn't a source and we fill in the blanks ourselves..." For Sharon, "...you can have, you can have bits and pieces of information, but the unconscious mind wants to fill in the gaps." "And—when the government covers information up from its people, people are going to fill in the blanks in all sorts of ways." In these two quotes, Sharon analyzes her own reflexive reaction to

encountering silences in her research and then the more community-level reaction as a kind of argument against government secrecy.

Different participants' reactions to the fundamental unknowability of their topics reveals a lot about their epistemological approach. In general, Harriet's reaction to the mystery at the heart of UFO Studies is highly personal: her knowing and unknowing is different from any other participant's, because she knows, personally, of the existence of extraterrestrials. The unknowledge she struggles with is that she only knows part of what happens to her during her extraterrestrial experiences. In describing the kinship she felt with other experiencers, she touched on this: "It feels as if there is some great huge amount of information and knowledge that we share, but we can't access just at this moment." What she can access at that particular moment is the *feeling*, the *intuition*, that they share this unknowledge. Both the knowledge and the unknowledge she possesses around the topic are derived from her own experiences, solidifying her as a deeply experiential researcher.

Sharon's approach to knowledge and unknowledge is slightly further towards the empirical side of the spectrum. At several points in our interviews, she discussed not-knowing when it came to whether or not a specific event had extraterrestrial origins: "So it's, it's really hard to discern anything like that and say, yes, it is extraterrestrial. No, it isn't, or...something's happened, but we don't know what, you know, we can only do what we can do." At another point in our interview, she questioned how anyone is really able to *know* anything when it comes to UFO Studies, although she did confidently state that she believes we are being visited by extraterrestrials. Along these same lines, she expressed skepticism about people who claim to know and speak extraterrestrial languages, or "star language": "...how can you know, we don't have any original alien language to compare it to? So how would you know?" Sharon's simultaneous skepticism and belief around extraterrestrials demonstrates the kind of *detached credulity* that accompanies most epistemic approaches, besides the purely experiential, establishing her as experiential-empirical in her approach.

Mark, whom we have established is a purely empirical researcher, made statements that were quite similar to Sharon's: "...people *are* really seeing something strange. But is it alien spacecraft or

something else? We don't know. That's why we're investigating it.” After conducting his study on abductees, he also mentioned that he remains unsure about whether abductions are “real” or not. He also discussed Roswell, briefly, stating that “Many people think they *do* know, but, you know, we don't.” Someone like Don, for example, has made strong statements in his books about what happened at Roswell, and did not speak extensively in his interviews with me about his experiences with not-knowing or unknowledge.

Jon, who continually lauded the sciences and dismissed his own expertise, discussed not being able to make a call about claims from UFO witnesses: “And I think a lot of times—who am I to? You know, with my English major in my MFA. You know, who am I to—to say they're absolutely wrong about these things?” Jon here implies that he does not possess the expertise to make a call about the truth value of UFO witness claims. He makes a similar statement when discussing research he has done into Lake Superior: “A lot of people around here claim or speculate that there's some kind of underwater facility in Lake Superior. I don't know if that's true or not. But a sea captain told me—a great lakes sailor—told me a couple weeks ago that something like a third or 30% of Lake Superior is not even charted. So I mean, it's, it's kind of crazy to think that this, this inland lake, this body of water, has not even not even been entirely explored.” Jon refused to take a position on whether there is a facility beneath the waters of Lake Superior, instead highlighting the fact that so much of the lake remains unknown, leaving space for possibility. Jon's epistemic approach is squarely empirical: his reactions to the unknown are curious but skeptical, his approach to research is journalistic, and although he is certainly curious about UFOs, he would not take a position on whether or not they are extraterrestrial.

Bill, another empirical researcher, described the measure of comfort he feels in unknowledge:

And that when I really did—those are the people I liked the most in this circle are the people who really want to understand what happened during this era, *and* have an abiding interest in trying to solve one of the world's great puzzles is, you know, you—we're not going to know who, who was holding the guns I don't think. But I think we already have a pretty good idea of how this assassination was done. And what it boils down to for *me* now is putting together the most bulletproof series, if you will, of evidence, that gives strong indication of how this assassination was conducted, without necessarily putting names on the players.

Bill is interested, empirically, in being able to piece together the timeline of the assassination, rather than naming people who actually held the murder weapon(s). This implies a measure of ease with the idea of not knowing; Bill is aware that there will always be silences within the JFK assassination case, and he can only work with the information he has been given. This places him squarely in the empirical-epistemic realm.

All three topics at hand contain significant silences, contributing to their basis in the enduring mysteries of unknowledge. JFK's missing brain, the missing alien bodies and crash debris from the Roswell crash site, and the nonexistent database of missing persons in the wilderness all illustrate either productive or unproductive silences. Silences that are productive are a kind of shadow of illicit government activity indicating wrongdoing by those in power. Unproductive silences are nothing more than inconveniences in the course of doing research. The productivity or unproductivity of a silence is of course a function of interpretation by the researcher, and this interpretation can lead to operationalization of the silence through imagined records or evidentiary imaginaries. For Cyril, the fact that the brain was missing indicated that it must have contained information that indicated multiple gunmen. Another interpretation of this silence is that the Kennedy family wanted to bury JFK with his brain and used the power in their hands to avoid best practices of preserving autopsy materials in cases of violent death.

V. Confronting the conspiracy

One of the things I made clear when recruiting participants was that I would be discussing the term “conspiracy theorist” with them: whether they had ever been labeled as such, how they felt about the term, and what they believed about their research topic vis-à-vis conspiracies; that is, whether they thought that the topic they were studying indeed involved a conspiracy. Although many of my participants had a vehement reaction to the term, not wanting to be associated with it in any context, one of my research questions—how does it feel to be labeled a conspiracy theorist, and how might that labeling contribute to how research is conducted?—necessitates this area of questioning. It is a political

stance and a politically informed practice to speak candidly with the people who are most directly affected by a particular phenomenon. In this case, that phenomenon is the pejorative and pathologizing nature of the label. This section will cover the conspiracy itself and interviewees' experiences and beliefs in a true conspiracy; feelings about the term "conspiracy theorist" and concomitant experiences with being labeled with the term; and conclude with discussions of other conspiracy theories that came up in the course of the interviews.

A True Conspiracy?

Just as I have had to clarify what I mean by a conspiracy and a conspiracy theory earlier in this dissertation, some participants also defined their terms. Mark kept it simple, stating that "the conspiracy is just at least two people conspiring to do something in secret...if you and I do something, alone, it's not a conspiracy. It's, you know, it's whatever it is, but it can't be a conspiracy." Felix went further than Mark, bringing in the question of power and the role of conspiracy theorists. For Felix, a conspiracy is "...where there is some sort of organized group of people that has some sort of spooky, hidden, weird agenda. And they're trying to enact some sort of power over people by pulling the wool over their eyes. And the conspiracy theorists are the ones who are trying to pull back the wool and see." Steve also grapples with the notion of power as he attempts to define "conspiracy": "...power of the conspiracy is just the idea of this cabal, right? The s—that there was a secret group that there was, and that they'd never been caught, and we don't know who they are, and then the government covered it up, or it *was* the government." Other participants preferred to use the term "cover-up" rather than "conspiracy": for Don, the JFK assassination could be considered a conspiracy, but Roswell was a *cover-up*: "Well, Roswell has been effectively covered up. Even the very people involved acknowledge: 'We were sworn to secrecy. We were told not to say another word about it. So we were ordered to cover it up.' That's not [a] conspiracy. Conspiracy is where, one or more—actually, it takes more than one person. Where a number of people conspire to perpetrate an illegal event. An illegal act." For Don, Roswell does not qualify as a conspiracy, because it was not a premeditated plan—it was a response to an event. He seems to also use the legal definition of

conspiracy.⁵⁷⁸ Sharon also preferred the term cover-up, which she defined as: "...groups within the government. Like, the idea is like a secret government. And in that there are compartmentalized groups who have different agendas. And some want the UFO subject to be public and others don't. And there's a difference of opinion." She complicated Don's notion of a cover-up in response to a singular event, drawing the cover-up out into a longer-form, continuing secret shadow government. She also points out that, in her opinion, there has also been a kind of "civilian cover-up" which has taken place as a result of people not wanting to accept the study of UFOs, and instead ridiculing the topic.

Beyond this division between conspiracy and cover-up, participants certainly had diverse opinions about what a conspiracy is, what it is not, and what is *almost* a conspiracy. Mark stated that "...we know, there are real conspiracies in life [chuckles]. And so the, so this is a this is there's a tension there. The elites are—generally speaking—don't like conspiracies unless they're pushing them themselves, as they sometimes do." Using the term *elites* is confusing from Mark; it makes me wonder if he knows that it is an antisemitic dog whistle, or if he is unaware of that fact. The fact remains that Mark uses the term; his ignorance of its implications is unknown. He also acknowledges the existence of true conspiracies and brings that fact up in other parts of the interview. Eddie mapped the relationship between ufology and conspiracy theory, pointing out the points at which conspiracy theories surfaced within ufology. Discussing early UFO research groups, Eddie says: "But there was also a notion that the government was suppressing this information, and [Donald] Keyhoe's main urge was Congressional hearings to, what he called, you know, break the lid off the silent group conspiracy. So already you have had something of an idea that there was a secretive group, hiding the facts. But it didn't go very far from the truth at that time or at least it was a reasonable supposition from it. Things got different later." In the latter part of the quote, Eddie obliquely references some of the more "out-there" theories that would surface within ufology in the 1990s, including the MJ-12 documents, alien bases under New Mexico and on the far side of the moon, and reptilians (another antisemitic conspiracy theory). Eddie and Mark both

⁵⁷⁸ Paul Marcus, "Criminal Conspiracy Law: Time to Turn Back from an Ever Expanding, Ever More Troubling Area," *William and Mary Bill of Rights Journal* 1, no. 1 (1993 1992): 1–46.

talk about ufology as though it has devolved, in some sense, since its early days, in part because of the proliferation of such “out there” theories.

Jon suggests that all conspiracies have a measure of truth to them, and Mark, at another point in our interviews, points to the JFK assassination as one example of a true conspiracy. Bill, in an impassioned rant against Ned Bennett (a CIA agent who issued a memo on ways to counter public skepticism towards the Warren Report), illustrated the ways in which people who are skeptical, people who do theorize or recognize government conspiracies, are not on equal footing with the government: “Bennett—who I consider destroying democracy at its most fundamental level, because not only are you attacking your opponent in an unfair way, but your opponent has no way to counter because you control the books, you control the newspapers, you control the mass media, you control your sources.” Bill goes into even greater depth discussing the wave of disinformation around the JFK assassination (reproduced from the quotation in the section on disinformation above): “And so with this wave of disinformation—and this is common practice, it is not rocket science—you can read almost any book on counterintelligence and they’ll tell you, this is how it’s done. But these are very important, uh, national security issues. And so as a result, this is how conspiracy theory in my opinion was the need for the state to be able to protect itself.” Thereby, labeling something as a conspiracy theory was an effective way for the state to dismiss it, particularly if, as Bill suggests, the state controls the mass media. The weaponization of the term conspiracy theory has been written about elsewhere; it is true that the government’s intention was to discredit critics by utilizing the term.⁵⁷⁹

Participants certainly did not consider *everything* to be a conspiracy: most were very careful about their wording. In discussing some Cold War theater relating to Oswald, Bill said “nothing conspiratorial here, you just read the documents.” Talking about pharmaceutical companies, Mark similarly suggested that

...all the stuff that pharmacy companies have done over the years to lobby the government to give them all the breaks, you know, so they can develop drugs and make millions of billions of dollars and stuff they go on behind the scenes, but I don't quite call it a conspiracy. You know, it is

⁵⁷⁹ Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*.

simply them doing, what they do is kind of against the public interest. And yeah, they're kind of doing it behind the scenes. But, you know, it's, it's not even illegal always, you know, it looks like passing money under the table.

Similarly, Felix suggests that most things that get interpreted as conspiracies are likely the result of something quotidian: “Most of these sorts of instances seem to be more like pure chance or, you know, random behaviors that end up getting interpreted a certain way. And anytime when there's actually some sort of real conspiracy that's going on, it ends up being for the most part, very one-dimensional: you know, someone didn't want to spend money, so they decided to pollute the environment.” Corporations committing crimes against the American populace does not seem to count as a conspiracy: many participants demonstrate care and determination when using the term “conspiracy,” not wanting to wield the term without need or precedent. The loadedness of the terms “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” seem to bleed into participants’ approaches to the notion of conspiracy itself.

Exploring the label of “conspiracy theorist”

Unsurprisingly, most participants cultivated negative feelings and associations with the term “conspiracy theorist.” For Cyril, “I think most of the time, it's used in a pejorative sense sometimes viciously, dismissively, sarcastically, or maybe with no specific vituperation or a desire to offend, but just to dismiss.” Even if it is not used with vehemence, the term can certainly be employed as a way to delegitimize ideas that may upend the status quo. Similarly, Mark considers the term to be “pejorative” and too easily “thrown around.” Don resents the term, recalling that journalists labeling him that way felt trivializing: “...in the past, a news person, or reporter, a TV host, would introduce me as a conspiracy buff. ...a conspiracy nut or a conspiracy, a conspiracy reporter or conspiracy investigator, that type of thing. It's—in the past, it would be more often ‘a conspiracy buff,’ That type of thing. As though you just dabble in it, it's just a hobby, that type of thing...I resent you suggesting that this is just a hobby.” Both Cyril and Eddie describe it, obliquely, as a “negative” term.

Though many participants had been labeled conspiracy theorists, not all were. Mark, who stated that he has never directly been called a conspiracy theorist, did discuss that the fringe nature of his

research area and its reputation as “crazy” has had wide-ranging effects on the discipline and the kind of research that gets done. As a public figure deeply involved in the JFK assassination mythos, Cyril recounted being called a conspiracy theorist and a “conspiratorial nut” because he was critical of the Warren Report. When asked how he felt about that, he reported becoming desensitized to it. To counteract the labeling, he continues to conduct his work as scientifically as possible: “And I deal with facts, matters of a concrete, specific nature. That's how I deal with it.” Harriet, alongside her colleagues at EERC, has been labeled a conspiracy theorist “...for putting out certain information about certain sightings or events.” She also recalled seeing other people “...who have done quite a lot of research who are being silenced by by calling them ‘conspiracy theorists.’” When asked how it felt to be labeled with the term, Harriet considered it “depressing and demoralizing.” Similarly, Sharon recalled “...the damage, the division, the—the isolation that you feel, because you're called a conspiracy theorist...” She recalled feeling bewildered and concerned when being labeled as such. Steve also felt “diminished” by being called a conspiracy theorist. For many participants who have experienced being called a conspiracy theorist, it is hurtful and does nothing to change their epistemic outlook or their interest in certain topics. It can be something that significantly affects their day-to-day experience and their self-perception, and as many pointed out, can feel emotionally damaging and draining.

Steve outlined the differences between “conspiracy theorist” and “conspiracy researcher,” (the term I was using at the time of his interview).⁵⁸⁰

I think it's a...[pause] demeaning term. It doesn't...I don't think people mean for it to be one, it's just—it's become the catch all...synonym for crazy and paranoid. And so I do think there is a difference between conspiracy theorists and conspiracy researchers. A conspiracy theorist loves every spooky coincidence you can throw at them. They have...this innate belief, again, it's this religion, this faith in something, and they don't care how, how you get there or what the truth is. If it sounds like it supports their belief, they're all for it. Um, and so, you know, they invent, um, and convince themselves that, that it's fact that, that, that it's derived for reason, um, or, or they just find someone and they believe their story...Um, but I don't think like within the world of libraries and archives...They, I don't think they come into contact that much, probably with conspiracy theorists, because conspiracy theorists don't try to prove their point by utilizing real research. I mean, some do, so I'm sure I'm being over general there...

⁵⁸⁰ I did not use this term at any other point except in Steve's interview; for subsequent interviews, I started using the term “alternative” or “counter-establishment” to refer to research about topics that have been labeled conspiracy theories.

Steve initially calls out the term “conspiracy theorist” as being “demeaning” before drawing boundaries around himself, a conspiracy *researcher*, and conspiracy *theorists*. According to Steve, conspiracy theorists can be spotted because they “love” coincidences, their belief system is quasi-religious, and they do not conduct actual research in libraries and archives. In characterizing conspiracy theorists thus, Steve indicates that his own approach to the topic is the inverse, which I did observe in how he described his practices of reflexivity: Instead of loving coincidences, he is suspicious of them; instead of having blind faith, he considers himself skeptical. And of course, he conducts research at libraries and archives. He continued, expanding on the differences:

It reminds me though, of the difference between like a Trekkie and a Trekker, like Star Trek fans, like somewhat, I guess still will maybe get angry if they're called Trekkies, you know, but, um, other people embrace that term and own it. Uh, and so I've heard legitimate researchers like Dr. John Newman say, I am a conspiracy theorist. So, um, for some people they're just reclaiming the term...But I do believe, you know, I believe there was a conspiracy and I'm theorizing how it worked based on the evidence I have...So, you know, it's a personal decision.

The notion of “reclaiming” the term and identifying as such recalls how some queer communities and communities of color have reclaimed slurs. Slurs, however, are hateful terms based on an aspect of a person’s identity: gender, sexuality, race, disability. The term *conspiracy theorist*, while indeed a negative term, is based on a person’s epistemic approach to the world. It can become dangerous to suggest that disparaging people according to their interests is at the same level as harmful and hateful labeling according to identity. This approaches the conservative ideological idea that Evangelical Christians are being bullied or excluded by society at large for their religious beliefs when they are in fact being held accountable for bigoted actions. Returning to the Trekkie/Trekker metaphor: people who research topics that have been labeled conspiracy theories by the wider world want to label *themselves*, not *be* labeled. “Trekkies,” like “conspiracy theorists,” has become a culturally loaded term in the American context. Quite often both are used as the butt of jokes. It makes sense that people who are commonly labeled as such would want to distance themselves from these terms.

Both Jon and Steve recalled intimate and family settings in which the term “conspiracy theorist” was either used against them or became a point of contention for family members. Steve recalled:

I remember one time, uh, I had some family over and I had some of my JFK books out. I had *Whitewash II: The FBI-Secret Service Coverup* by Harold Weisberg. Um, and like my family made some joke about like, "Oh, you know, it was, uh, it was the Teamsters and the CIA and the KGB!"...And that's a valid satirical commentary on the conspiracy community, because there are some that are like that. But it's also generally not an accurate depiction. Like people are very scrupulous about trying to put forth a reasonable scenario.

Steve acknowledges the validity of his family's joking criticism, but he also takes light offense at it.

Having your loved ones immediately dismiss a topic that you take seriously and spend a lot of time thinking about is disheartening to say the least. When I asked if he has ever been called or labeled a conspiracy theorist, he recalled a moment with his wife:

Well [pause] Maybe not in so many terms...but, uh, at one point when I was researching, [to himself, quietly:] Actually, [laughs] maybe, maybe she did say that...So my wife has to suffer through a lot of my working through all this and trying to figure things out, And, uh, at one point when I was like, going over some, something about photographs or trajectory, she was like, 'I don't want you to be conspiracy theorist.'

In this instance, Steve's wife labeled him a conspiracy theorist by virtue of the kind of work he was doing: specifically, the activity of tracing the bullet's trajectory. She labels him as a conspiracy theorist by telling him that she explicitly *does not want him to be one*. The label being used as a mode of dismissal and discomfort thus also exists within intimate relationships, and not only in public forums and sociopolitical contexts. Steve recalled feeling judged, mildly ashamed, and righteously indignant.

Jon had a similar moment with his wife, but in that instance, he had applied the term to himself:

I don't mind; I call myself a conspiracy theorist...I can't remember what it was—in the kitchen the other day, my wife corrected me...she said, "You're not a conspiracy theorist." And I thought, "Well, what do you mean I'm not? Of course I am." With some things—not with everything, right? I think there is that sort of lazy assumption that a conspiracy theorist is...they assign us to all conspiracy theories. And so I certainly do not, you know, I'm very picky about my conspiracies. But I don't know. I don't mind—I don't feel like that's a pejorative term, either. I feel like I'm, I feel like a little bit of that is healthy. And of course, we all know people that are that, you know, it goes too far. And it becomes very unhealthy.

Similar to Steve's wife, Jon's wife does not want him to be considered a conspiracy theorist, to even consider *himself* a conspiracy theorist, because of the negative connotations with the term. Though Jon was one of the few participants who identified with the term, he too felt defensive in response to his wife's comments. For Jon, he does not feel like the term is pejorative, and he believes that a balance is

necessary to stay “healthy.” Both Jon and Steve felt judged by their partners and families, which is likely an alienating and isolating experience.

Inez, who considers herself a “conspiracy tourist” (while Jon refers to himself as “conspiracy curious”) makes a similar point to the assumption Jon mentions about people assuming that someone interested in one or two conspiracy theories must be interested in all of them: “...I am not someone who...buys into that all of this stuff, hook line, and sinker, you know what I mean? Like, I'm not someone who...I think QAnon stuff is completely and totally ridiculous, like, you know, but I understand why people are drawn to it, I get that, you know?” Unlike many people who find QAnon to be ridiculous, Inez can understand why people are taken in by it because she has herself been taken in by 9/11 conspiracy theories.

Although Bill pushed back against my labeling him and other researchers as “conspiracy researchers,” his relationship with the term can be somewhat neutral, at least in certain contexts. He expressed sympathy with people dismissing JFK assassination research:

...this is why I don't get annoyed when people don't want to study lynchings or assassinations. Cause I understand they're sensitive subjects. And I, why I don't get annoyed when people think...that the people who follow the Jack Kennedy case are crazy, because they haven't studied the evidence. You know, who's going to bother studying the evidence unless you've got a particularly good reason to do that? So I don't get annoyed by that. I get annoyed by people in government. I get annoyed by people who know better trying to wave us off this discussion. And they've got an agenda. And their agenda is: don't question the way we do business. Because the way this country does business, assassinations, unfortunately, are part of the policy.

Rather than getting too upset about people who dismiss him or consider him crazy, Bill takes that anger and redirects it toward the government. Bill seems to have a complex relationship with the term *conspiracy theorist*—he will rarely say the term aloud, and (as discussed in chapter 3) his reluctance to be even tangentially associated with the term is the reason that I decided to retire my original “conspiracy researcher” framing. And while Bill stated in the above quote that he doesn’t mind being thought of as crazy, he did not mention directly how he feels about being called a conspiracy theorist or whether he ever has been. Rather than conspiracy research, he prefers to call his work either “investigative journalism” or “operations analysis.” “That's why the Kennedy case is such a rich field. And this is why I

always ask people to refer to this as an operations analysis, not a conspiracy. It's, you're saying, look, I think there was an operation here to kill the president. I think more than one person was involved. So let me study it methodically. And that's what I've tried to do to the best of my ability.” Alternative terminology was also proposed by Cyril, who prefers the terms “‘other views,’ ‘minority views,’ ‘alternative theories’ and so on,” instead of “conspiracy theory.”

Self-determination is very important for these researchers, its primacy surfacing throughout the interviews. Indeed, Cyril makes the point that he does not consider himself a conspiracy theorist because—citing the notorious Gallup poll—he is in the majority: “So one of my favorite observations is, who's the conspiracy theorists? I'm on the majority side. They are the conspiracy theorists. Not I.” And although Jon was comfortable calling himself a conspiracy theorist in his own home and around his wife, this comfort is highly contextual. He mentions several groups, including information professionals and fellow researchers, who he does not want to know that he is “a UFO guy.”

Harriet has her own particular relationship to labels, seeming particularly sensitive to those that came from within the UFO research community. She is often called an abductee, a term with which she does not identify. She finds that this is a particularly American problem:

...I replace [“abduction”] with “contact.” People...in the states generally don't like that. And, for example, on many occasions in the States, when I've spoken, I've been introduced as an abductee. And I really resent that. So even though in all of the documentation I've sent them, I've referred to myself as an "experiencer," they automatically change that "abductee," which automatically gives it a negative slant and a negative connotation that you don't find outside of the US.

Harriet's identity as an experiencer/communicator is very important for her and her self-determination. The inability for American contexts to respect her wishes in how she wants to be identified is telling: one would think that ufologists would themselves be respectful of what labels people want to use to reference themselves.

Other Conspiracy Theories

As we discussed conspiracy theories as a general category, participants often brought up other theories beyond the three main areas of research: specifically, 9/11 theories, QAnon, voter fraud in the 2020 U.S. election, and anti-vaccination theories. I will discuss each of these in this section.

Inez was the only participant to mention 9/11 theories, and she did so in retrospect: “...when I believed, and I'm not sure I ever fully believed it, but I was willing to allow myself to believe it, that 9/11 had been an inside job...there were certain things about it that made sense to me.” She maintained her own skepticism and reflexivity about 9/11 theories, tracing her interest in the topic to the event itself: “I mean, I remember being—when I first started investigating the 9/11 thing, because I remember on 9/11 feeling like, there's just something too perfect about the way those two buildings are falling.” She mentions elsewhere that 9/11 is the topic that she has done the most reading on, but that she is also at a stage in her life where she no longer explicitly believes there was a conspiracy. Her impetus to do research on 9/11 had to do with an instinct, a feeling. Through reflexivity, however, she was able to keep a measure of distance from her topic, remaining skeptical of her own feelings about the event.

QAnon, the mutant right-wing extremist conspiracy theory/ alternate reality game/ cult, was mentioned in several interviews, as it had become so notorious at the time of the interviews that it was nearly synonymous with the concept of conspiracy theory. Cyril did not directly name QAnon, but he did discuss Marjorie Taylor Greene, the infamous QAnon supporter elected to Congress: “I don't dismiss things quickly and lightly. I do believe that there are people who definitely go off the spectrum. And a lot of that—I will make this comment, [it] is very important for you to consider—that is that many of these comments are borne in mind of political extremists like this crazy bitch woman in Congress from Ohio: Greene. And one of the things she said, and I'm Jewish, I find it incredibly offensive. Rothschild money, in Israel, they sent down laser beams that start wildfires in California...” Cyril, who has himself been called a conspiracy theorist, does not want to be associated with right-wing, extremist, antisemitic QAnon supporters. Jon expresses a similar anxiety about his colleagues at the university he teaches at: “...my

colleagues would put that in the same cookie box, you know, QAnon and UFO people are in the same jar. Yeah, and that's really not fair.” Use of the conspiracy theorist label, when it is so deeply connected to something like QAnon, tends to flatten the subtleties that exist within the heterogeneous milieu of conspiracy theories, reinforcing the dominant monological attitude toward any and all alternative or counter-establishment research.⁵⁸¹ Inez references QAnon multiple times, discussing its trajectory, “[QAnon] started out, like, just this random thing, but that it then got weaponized...” as well as criticizing the supposed research QAnon supporters are doing: “I don't know how...all the QAnon when people say do the research, right, do the research, do the research yourself? I don't know what they're talking about, like, what research are they doing?” The kind of research that is done by QAnon “bakers” who interpret “Q drops” is an epistemically distinct style and should not be confused with the topic-specific, person-specific, counter-establishment research selves identified and outlined in this dissertation.⁵⁸²

Conspiracy theories about voter fraud have existed prior to the U.S. presidential election of 2020⁵⁸³ and have been shown to have deleterious effects on trust in democratic electoral systems.⁵⁸⁴ Discussion of voter fraud as a conspiracy theory from democratic media and allegations of voter fraud from conservative media were all ubiquitous at the time, I was interviewing people in late 2020 and early 2021. Mark references voter fraud in his discussion of the pejorative nature of the conspiracy theorist label: “Particularly now, we know that people are, rightly or wrongly, are saying—the Trump people are talking about a conspiracy that doesn't exist, right, about the election.” He frames the voter fraud conspiracy theory as false, using it as an example of a false conspiracy theory that is used to flatten the

⁵⁸¹ Harambam, Jaron, and Stef Aupers. “‘I Am Not a Conspiracy Theorist’: Relational Identifications in the Dutch Conspiracy Milieu.” *Cultural Sociology* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 113–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975516661959>.

⁵⁸² Partin, William Clyde, and Alice Emily Marwick. “The Construction of Alternative Facts: Dark Participation and Knowledge Production in the QAnon Conspiracy.” *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, October 5, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2020i0.11302>.

⁵⁸³ Musgrove, George Derek. “The Ingredients for ‘Voter Fraud’ Conspiracies.” *Modern American History* 1, no. 2 (July 2018): 227–32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2018.7>.

⁵⁸⁴ Berlinski, Nicolas, Margaret Doyle, Andrew M. Guess, Gabrielle Levy, Benjamin Lyons, Jacob M. Montgomery, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler. “The Effects of Unsubstantiated Claims of Voter Fraud on Confidence in Elections.” *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, June 28, 2021, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2021.18>.

category into a monological phenomenon. Felix also gives the example of voter fraud as a way to illustrate his feeling that once theories become popular enough, they cease to be conspiracy theories:

I think one thing that strikes a chord with me about the conspiracy theory and whether it's really a conspiracy theory or not—I'm...reading a lot on the conservative subreddit, and the number of people that are alleging voter fraud without any evidence of voter fraud. Like they're, they're pointing at things that are not [real]. But is that considered a conspiracy theory at this point? Because there's so many people, our president included, screaming about this actually happening. And so, you know some people may label it a conspiracy theory, you know, and then the other half of the population thinks that that's what's actually going on.

Here, Felix is pointing to the profound sociocultural disconnects that result from populist and fascist political ideologies, using voter fraud as the example. For him, the moment enough people believe something, it ceases to be a conspiracy theory. The fringe nature of conspiracy theories is baked into Felix's very definition of them.

Sharon was the only participant who discussed theories of voter fraud in the U.S. election as something that she believed in. When asked about her opinion on the JFK assassination, Sharon responded by discussing her feelings about the 2020 election:

And John F. Kennedy, who won the people—the American people's hearts. Can't have it be like that, sorry. Just like Donald Trump—I mean, not saying he won people's hearts, but he did do a few things that were very interesting, and I think he—and this was just my opinion from a distance mind you—is that he you know, he was shown the door basically for...and that could be a conspiracy. I don't know. It's not my country. I can't really say for sure. But there seems to be some truth to the voting being fiddled with by the Chinese, the Russians, you name it. The Chinese are into everything at the moment.

Sharon very openly shared her belief in the voter fraud conspiracy theory, although she hedges it by downplaying her knowledge, stating that it's merely the opinion she has formed from outside of the United States. She does not unequivocally state that the 2020 election *was* a conspiracy, merely that it *could* be. This is a form of the ubiquitous “just saying” or “just putting it out there” rhetoric that has been used by many prominent proponents of harmful conspiracy theories.⁵⁸⁵ It also cannot be ignored that the

⁵⁸⁵ Jane and Fleming, *Modern Conspiracy*.

way Sharon speaks about China has the flavor of xenophobia to it and seems to also reflect a conservative talking point often employed by Trump to bolster U.S. nationalism.⁵⁸⁶

Sharon also expressed her unwillingness to be vaccinated against COVID-19. She explicitly stated, however, that she's not *anti-vaccine*:

...mandatory vaccinations that are going to be rolled, if they are mandatory. They're not not here in Australia yet, we hope it won't be. But you know, with the COVID vaccination people are saying—because I'm—I don't—I'm not an anti-vaxxer, I'm pro-choice. You know, if you want to have the vaccine, go right ahead. I don't particularly want it. That's my personal opinion. I would have it if it had been fully tested, and trialed, and I knew it was safe, right? Which I—and I have had vaccines in the past when I've traveled. I'm not against that. But I want it to be safe. And so far we're hearing that it's not. And not not for everyone...I've been labeled a conspiracy theorist because I'm fact checking, you know, through my own Facebook page on various things that I've posted. And other people I know are being called that too.

Utilizing reproductive rights rhetoric is a hallmark of anti-vaccination protestors, who famously hold up “my body, my choice” signs—the key difference being the discrepancy between the public health effects of, on one hand, forced births, and on the other, herd immunity.⁵⁸⁷ Sharon's openness to other vaccines and skepticism of the COVID vaccine illustrates the contextual specificity of this particular moment. In the past two years, we have witnessed scientific knowledge production is unfolding in real time as scientists grapple with COVID amid an ever-widening infodemic overabundance of both correct and incorrect information about coronaviruses, the diseases they cause, the way COVID-19 spreads, and the side effects of the vaccines developed to fight it.⁵⁸⁸ Another interesting thing that is happening in this quote is that Sharon claims to have been labeled a conspiracy theorist (although later in the interview, she says that it was not direct, but rather, “implied”) because she claims she is *fact checking*. This is reminiscent of the right's co-opting of the term *fake news*.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁶ Samuel L. Perry, Andrew L. Whitehead, and Joshua B. Grubbs, “Prejudice and Pandemic in the Promised Land: How White Christian Nationalism Shapes Americans' Racist and Xenophobic Views of COVID-19,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44, no. 5 (April 9, 2021): 759–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1839114>.

⁵⁸⁷ Melissa N. Montoya and Eve C. Feinberg, “My Body, Whose Choice?,” *Fertility and Sterility* 117, no. 3 (March 1, 2022): 485–86, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fertnstert.2021.12.018>.

⁵⁸⁸ Steve Oswald et al., eds., *The Pandemic of Argumentation*, vol. 43, Argumentation Library (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91017-4>.

⁵⁸⁹ Steve G. Hoffman, “The Responsibilities and Obligations of STS in a Moment of Post-Truth Demagoguery,” *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 4 (July 24, 2018): 444–52, <https://doi.org/10.17351/ests2018.259>.

Both journalists and academics habitually list conspiracy theories alongside other social problems that are categorically morally indefensible, such as white supremacy, racism, and male supremacy/patriarchy.⁵⁹⁰ This implies that, as a category of phenomena, they are indefensible as a whole. This chapter has illustrated the ways in which research into what wider society would likely call “conspiracy theories” is *not* categorically problematic. Thus, when invoking a term like *conspiracy theory*, we must be aware that it has become so widely used, in such a general way, as to become nearly useless. While belief in one conspiracy theory *may* predict belief in others,⁵⁹¹ that is not always the case. Furthermore, as we saw with Inez’s belief in 9/11 conspiracy theories, people may move beyond their staunch belief in a harmful conspiracy theory over their lifetimes.

VI. Conclusion: Implications of the Research Self Framework

This chapter has outlined the dimensions of the novel theoretical framework of the Research Self (RS). As a concept, the RS is derived from notions of self within symbolic interactionist approaches, as well as Kuhlthau’s ISP. Although emotions are not an explicit dimension of the research self, they are certainly part of Dimension 4, Practices and Conceptualizations. A researcher’s reaction to the emotions they feel in the course of conducting research will have an impact on how they think about themselves as a researcher and their work overall. The final section in this chapter, V., explored the role of the conspiracy theory label in counter-establishment research. The role of conspiracy theories is not made an explicit dimension of the RS, because it is only relevant for a few kinds of research: counter-establishment research, conspiracy research (e.g., QAnon bakers), conspiracy theory theory (academic

⁵⁹⁰ Alice Marwick, Benjamin Clancy, and Katherine Furl, “Far-Right Online Radicalization” (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life, 2022).

⁵⁹¹ Douglas, Karen M., and Robbie M. Sutton. “The Hidden Impact of Conspiracy Theories: Perceived and Actual Influence of Theories Surrounding the Death of Princess Diana.” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 148, no. 2 (April 2008): 210–21. <https://doi.org/10.3200/SOCP.148.2.210-222>.

research on conspiracy theories), and research that intersects directly with conspiracy theories, such as science communication research.

The RS framework is a highly flexible theoretical framework that can not only be applied to other areas of counter-establishment research, but also to other studies of research practices. All of the dimensions of the RS work together to produce a holistic portrait of the way an individual conducts research, presented in the tables in Appendix C. The RS framework not only brings information seeking and symbolic interactionism into conversation with one another, but it also creates a highly flexible way to analyze and visualize an individual's approach to research. This meta-portrait of how the self relates to research practice does not currently exist in the LIS and/or information seeking literature. Future research may look into how a similar portrait could function at the community or disciplinary level.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This project grew out of a desire to understand the realities behind the maxim “*do your own research*,” espoused by prominent conspiracy theorists like David Icke to Kony Rowe. Conspiracy theorists often emulate academic rhetoric, at the same time that they subvert and challenge the epistemic authority of science and academia.⁵⁹² Social scientists have acknowledged and explored the extant parallels between social science and conspiracy theory: Anita M. Waters explores conspiracy theorizing in the Black community as a sort of amateur sociological inquiry or *ethnosociology*, an everyday practice in which people theorize about social circumstances and phenomena;⁵⁹³ Harambam and Aupers argue that conspiracy theorists resist scientific dogma by redefining and reshaping the boundaries of scientific knowledge, “compet[ing] with (social) scientists in complex battles for epistemic authority...;”⁵⁹⁴ Emma A. Jane and Chris Fleming have characterized conspiracy theorizing as a kind of “folk sociology.”⁵⁹⁵ On the whole, however, academics, journalists, politicians, and other epistemic authorities often dismiss conspiracy theorists uncritically and out of hand, by virtue of the perceived danger or ignorance of their ideas.⁵⁹⁶ Many conspiracy theories *are* indeed dangerous; but some are relatively harmless and should not necessarily be grouped together with those that pose risks to public health and safety. Many studies of conspiracy theory place implicit value judgements on reason over intuition and trust in authorities over suspicion of them. Further, the focus for most academic studies of conspiracy theories—particularly in psychology—is on the figure of the conspiracy *theorist*, rather than that of the conspiracy *theory*, the

⁵⁹² Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers, “Contesting Epistemic Authority: Conspiracy Theories on the Boundaries of Science.”

⁵⁹³ Anita M. Waters, “Conspiracy Theories as Ethnosociologies: Explanation and Intention in African American Political Culture.”

⁵⁹⁴ Harambam and Aupers, “Contesting Epistemic Authority: Conspiracy Theories on the Boundaries of Science,” 466.

⁵⁹⁵ Emma A. Jane and Chris Fleming, *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid*.

⁵⁹⁶ Jack Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*; Didier Fassin, “The Politics of Conspiracy Theories: On AIDS in South Africa and a Few Other Global Plots The Politics of HIV/AIDS,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, no. 2 (2011 2010): 39–50; Harambam and Aupers, “Contesting Epistemic Authority.”

socio-cultural contexts in which conspiracy theories are constructed, and/or their wider, systemic causes and effects.

Despite the fact that the act of *doing research* figures so prominently in the conspiracy canon, the information seeking practices of individuals looking into conspiracy theories remain under-theorized. This dissertation is an initial foray into the arena of investigating the information seeking practices of researchers looking into three distinct topics that have been labeled “conspiracy theories:” theories around the assassination of John F. Kennedy, UFOs and the 1947 crash at Roswell, New Mexico, and the Missing 411 phenomenon. Perspectives that clash with the official story of the assassination of John F. Kennedy reject the notion that Lee Harvey Oswald alone killed the President, claiming that there were other shooters present in the Texas Schoolbook Depository or on the “grassy knoll” at Dealey Plaza. Counter-establishment research communities started to spring up almost immediately after the assassination took place. Ufology (otherwise known as UFO studies) has a long and complex history beginning in the United States in the late 1940s. Ufology was first part of military inquiries into UFOs, then an academic inquiry at the University of Colorado in the 1960s. After being rejected as a viable subject of research in both of these arenas, a variety of independent UFO research centers cropped up in the 1970s and 1980s, some of which are still active. Missing 411 is the newest theory (devised in the 21st century) and is largely the work of a single researcher, David Paulides, who refused to be interviewed for this dissertation. As a theory, it alleges that people who go missing in the North American wilderness are, at least some of the time, connected by some unnamed supernatural force—possibly UFOs, possibly Bigfoot, Paulides refuses to say.

In the early stages of this project, I used the term “conspiracist researcher” to refer to those who have conducted research into conspiracy-theory topics. It was only after a phone conversation with Bill Simpich, a prolific Kennedy assassination researcher, that I decided it was no longer useful to even use the term “conspiracist,”⁵⁹⁷ despite the academic justification and hedging that I performed around the

⁵⁹⁷See Chapter 3, Methodology & Methods, for a more detailed account of this conversation.

term. I have since graduated to the term “counter-establishment research” to refer to the various investigations being conducted by my study participants. Counter-establishment research can be considered any kind of research, conducted systematically, that goes against establishment institutions, norms, and/ or consensus. These areas of research have enduring mysteries at their centers, and are often labeled “conspiracy theories,” “pseudoscientific” or “paranormal.” Counter-establishment research topics are not necessarily morally righteous by virtue of operating outside of established institutions, nor are they morally condemnable because they do. Each topic of counter-establishment research must be evaluated individually for the social harm it could, or has, caused.

Data for this work came from grounded-theory-informed intensive interviewing with twelve participants. I interviewed each participant in two sessions. I coded and recoded the data myself, using a symbolic interactionist theoretical framework, until theoretical categories emerged. This dissertation examines the ways in which the counter-establishment researchers I spoke with seek information, the emotions that come up in the process, how these researchers relate to and think about the term “conspiracy theorist,” and what their relationships to themselves, their research, and establishment research. Through these areas of inquiry, this dissertation starts to build a necessarily-always-incomplete portrait of information seeking and behavior among counter-establishment researchers. This research puts conspiracy theory scholarship and information seeking scholarship in conversation with one another, introducing further nuance into who we think of as a “conspiracy theorist” and what it can mean to “do your own research.” Without such nuance, we risk continuing down the path of shaming, debunking, and pathologizing, deepening the ever-widening channel between counter-establishment work and academic work. Thus, this work also seeks to bridge the extant gaps between academics and counter-establishment researchers—illustrating that debunking and pathologizing is not the only way academics can engage with counter-establishment researchers, and that watching YouTube videos or listening to podcasts is not the only way to do “one’s own” research.

This work presents a new symbolic interactionist framework: the Research Self (RS). The RS has six dimensions: (1) originating life stage, (2) motivations, (3) methods, (4) practices and

conceptualizations, (5) identity, and (6) epistemology (see fig. 5.1 for a visualization) Dimension one, originating life stage, is concerned with when in an individual's life they became interested in the research topic: childhood, young adulthood, or adulthood. This dimension emphasizes how important the research topic has been over an individual's lifetime and is likely more important for "amateur" kinds of research like counter-establishment research. Dimension two, motivations, looks at what drives the individual researcher to continue their research, from community building and self-insight to making a contribution to the larger research landscape. Dimension three, methods, lists the methods used by the researcher: interviewing, archival research, etc. Dimension four, practices and conceptualizations, is the most abstract of the dimensions; it does not have static categories; rather, it provides an opportunity to elaborate on how an individual researcher thinks about and carries out their research. Dimension five, identity, is a wide-ranging category that contains the individual's identities, especially as they influence research: experiencer/communicator, abductee, journalist, woman, etc. Dimension six, epistemology, is a spectrum from empirical to experiential (see fig. 5.5). Along with dimension three, this is the most directly related to research. Taken as a whole, Research Self is a highly flexible framework designed to support a high-level investigation into an individual's relationship to research. This model came out of earlier information seeking models, like Kuhlthau's Information Seeking Process (ISP) and Bates' berrypicking model. Rather than looking specifically at a single behavioral aspect of information seeking, however, the RS framework looks holistically at several facets that influence how an individual conducts research. It tries to get beyond the behavioral to address some of the structural aspects that influence research, particularly in dimension two, motivations, and dimension five, identity. This model is not designed to be static; I hope to grow and change it in future research.

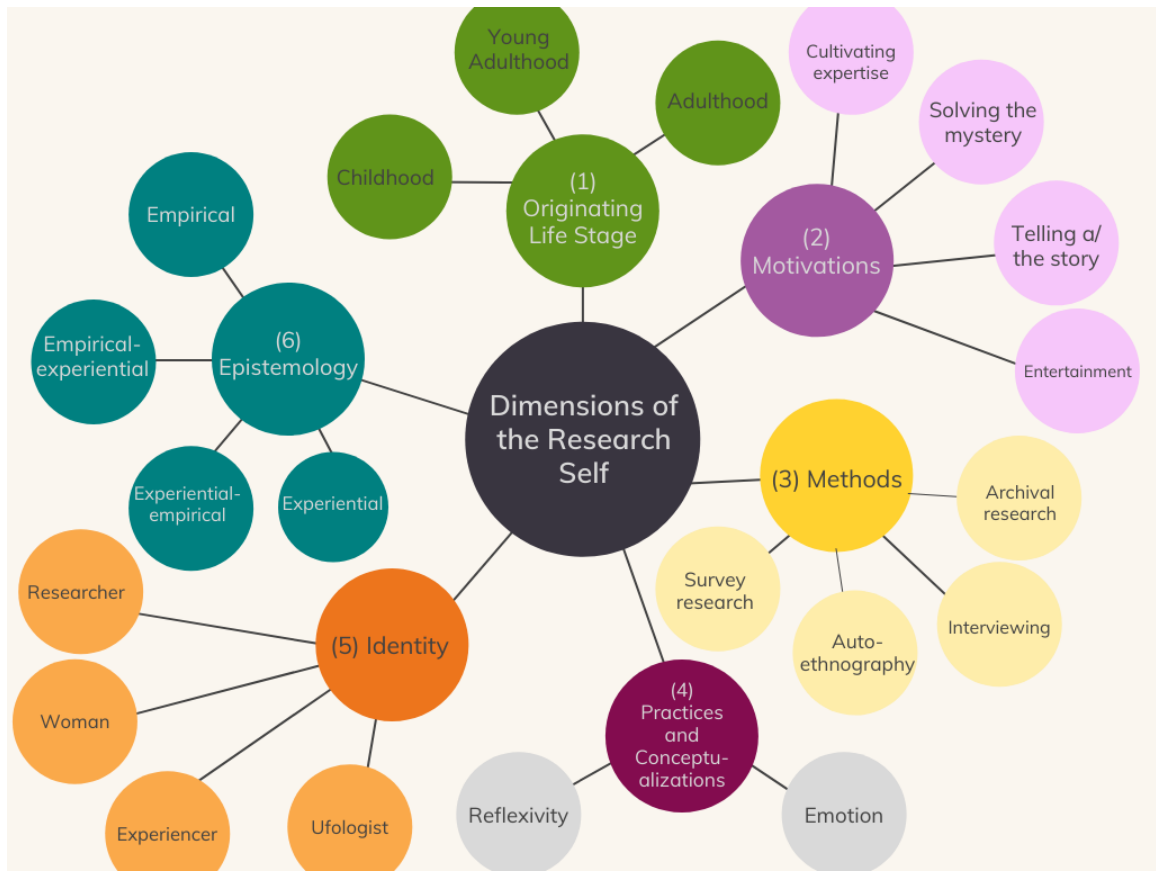


Figure 5.1: The Dimensions of the Research Self

The RS can provide a method for mapping how a given community of researchers conducts research—using this framework, I was able to develop a substantive theory of counter-establishment research. One of the most evident RS findings in this study is shown here, in figure 5.2:

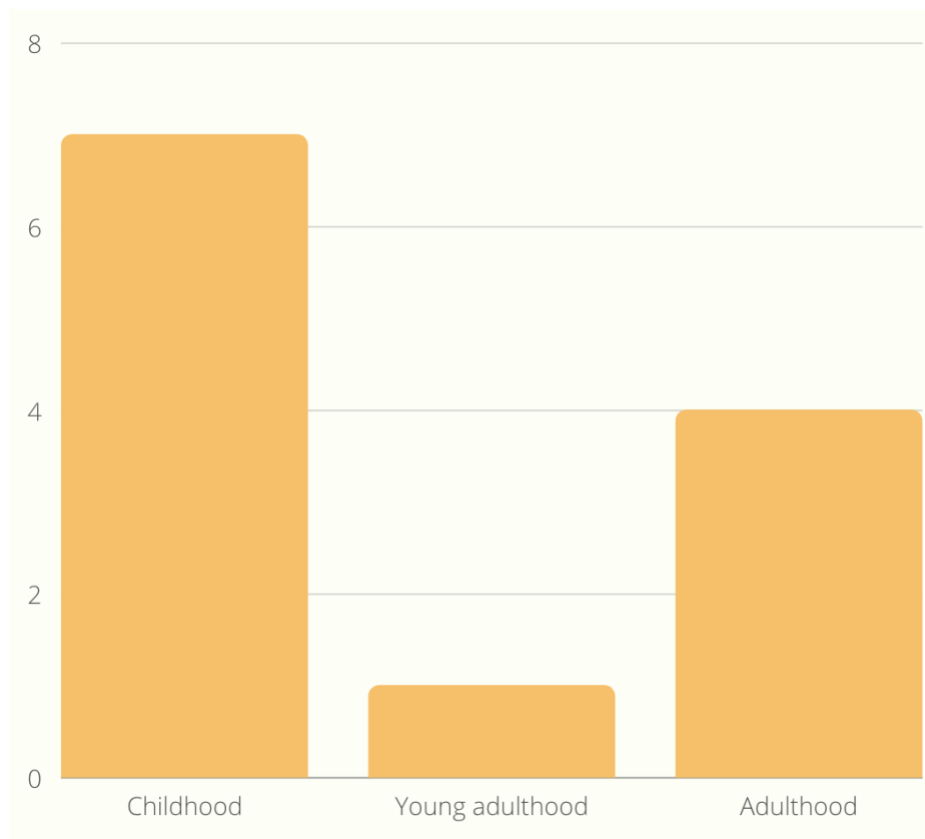


Figure 5.2: Visualization of Dimension 1: Originating Life Stage

Over half of participants (seven out of twelve) became interested in their research topic in childhood. Four became interested in adulthood, and one in young adulthood. Many cited an impactful media diet that consisted of widely publicized events (the assassination of JFK, Watergate), as well as books alleging coverups (*Whitewash* by Harold Weisberg, etc.) and science fiction movies and television shows. Two (Jesse and Harriet) discussed childhood experiences with the strange and inexplicable as catalysts for their continued interest in adulthood.

Indeed, the enduring mysteries at the center of these topics could be why researchers find themselves tied to them throughout their lifetimes. Counter-establishment research topics are suffused with an inability to *know* unequivocally and with confidence; at some level, they are fundamentally unknowable. In this sense, counter-establishment researchers are attempting to research and understand Foucault's *inaccessible domain of nothingness*, dealing in the mysterious, the ephemeral, and the

difficult-to-measure. Ufology, for instance, is deeply rooted in the notion that something is happening, but we do not know what, and that is why it needs to be studied. Many counter-establishment researchers will never truly find the answer, or if they think they do, they will not be able to convince others. Having been captivated by these enduring mysteries in childhood, many counter-establishment researchers find the puzzles at the center of these topics motivating. Becoming consumed by this research, a person's identity as a counter-establishment researcher can become deeply connected to their selfhood over their lifetime.

To refer to the tension between knowing and not knowing within counter-establishment topics, I have introduced the notion of *unknowledge*. Unknowledge refers to knowledge of an absence, or knowledge that a piece of evidence exists, has existed, or should exist. Unknowledge is an awareness that an archival or evidentiary silence exists and is itself having effects on the research topic and the world at large. I have also introduced the related concepts of *evidentiary silences* and *evidentiary imaginaries*. Evidentiary silences go beyond, but function similarly to, Trouillot's archival silences.⁵⁹⁸ They exist outside of the archival realm, but within subjects that can be researched, and can be produced by absences of many different types of evidence: a witness to a UFO sighting's missing memories, for instance. The silences created outside of such a framework may not have the same kind of permanence as their archival equivalents, nor may they function according to the same level of state-sponsored or institutional power. Silences still tend to produce imaginaries, even absent the context of an archives. Gilliland and Caswell's *imagined records* "...can function societally in ways similar to actual records because of the weight of their absence or their aspirational nature."⁵⁹⁹ Impossible archival imaginaries are "archivally impossible in the sense that they will never result in actualized records in any traditional sense unless they are drawn into some kind of co-constitutive relationship with actualized records."⁶⁰⁰ Imagined archives and impossible archival imaginaries are alternative, affective understandings of records and their collectives.

⁵⁹⁸ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*.

⁵⁹⁹ Gilliland and Caswell, "Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined," 53.

⁶⁰⁰ Gilliland and Caswell, "Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined," 60.

They can easily clash with existing records. Like evidentiary silences, evidentiary imaginaries and imagined evidence are not as fixed as their archival equivalents, because they do not exist within a framework of institutional permanence and power. They can have similarly powerful effects on how researchers consider a research topic that is suffused with unknowledge, however. For example, Don told me that he dreams of a Roswell witness taking him to their attic and showing him a piece of extraterrestrial material from the crash. The productivity or unproductivity of a silence is of course a function of interpretation by the researcher, and this interpretation can lead to operationalization of the silence through imagined records or evidentiary imaginaries. For Cyril, the fact that Kennedy's brain was missing indicated that it must have contained information that indicated multiple gunmen. Another interpretation of this silence is that the Kennedy family wanted to bury JFK with his brain, and used their institutional power to avoid best practices of preserving autopsy materials in cases of violent death.

The second dimension of the RS, Motivations, is extremely flexible and can include a variety of motivating factors for continuing research. In the visualization below (fig. 5.3), I have included motivations that were mentioned by two or more participants. "Making a contribution," or making a small impact on the landscape of human knowledge, is a research motivation that I share. Getting one's research taken seriously is self-explanatory; producing outputs can mean publishing monographs, articles, or television programs. "Going on the hunt," one of the most common contributions—named by four interviewees—refers to the enjoyment of looking for something specific, often online, in archives, or using other information institutions. To develop "personal understanding" can be a stepping stone to making a contribution, but it doesn't have to be: it has to do with understanding the phenomenon oneself, or understanding oneself *through* the phenomenon. "Entertainment" is related, and is self explanatory. "Solving the mystery" is related to "going on the hunt," except that the satisfaction comes from finding the answers, or the possibility of finding the answers, rather than the activity of *looking*. "Convincing the public" refers to putting research out that might sway the general populace that the official story is wrong, and the counter-establishment explanation is the true one. "Fighting the powers that be" includes using

one's research to go head-to-head with scientists, government actors, or other authorities that one perceives as untrustworthy.

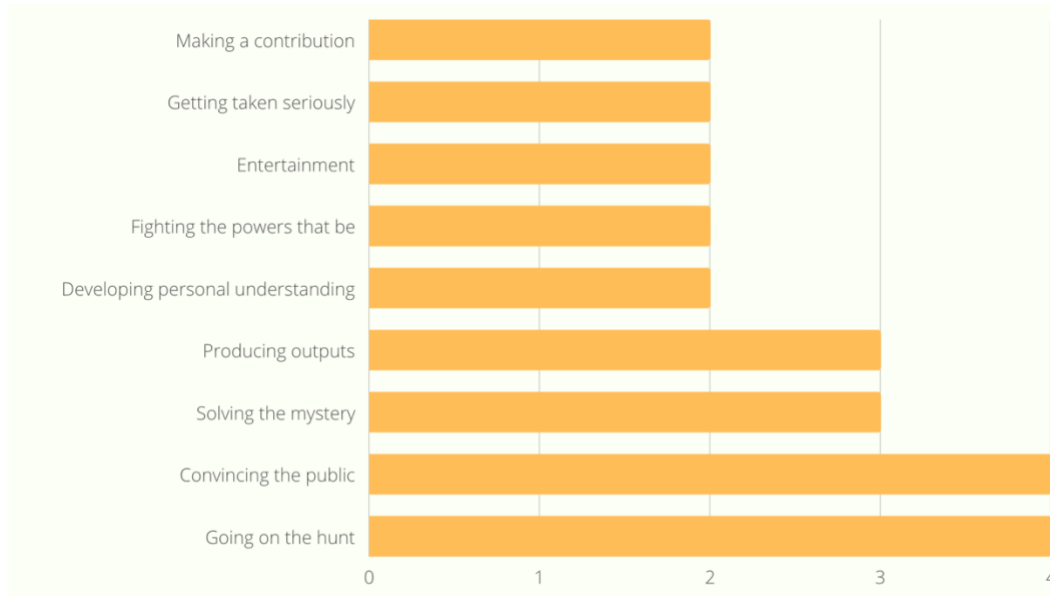


Figure 5.3: Visualization of Dimension 2: Motivations

One of the most significant overarching findings that came out of this dissertation work is that counter-establishment research is decidedly heterogeneous, encompassing myriad methodological and epistemological approaches. Some aspects of counter-establishment research parallel other kinds of (academic, establishment) research, and others are features specifically of counter-establishment research. Even among a small sample size of twelve researchers, participants described a medley of research methods, including interviewing, anthropological fieldwork, autoethnography, archival research, library research, online research, survey methods, and forensic experiments. These methods are visualized below, in figure 5.4. I have included all of the methods used, including those mentioned by only one researcher, to illustrate the breadth of different methods being employed in counter-establishment research. The most common methods used are interviewing and archival research. Even the ways in which participants engaged in archival work was varied: Bill's cracking of cryptonyms and pseudonyms in U.S. government

documents relating to the Kennedy assassination is distinct from Sharon’s building out of UFORA’s organizational archives, which mostly include written accounts of extraterrestrial encounters. Participants who employed the other most popular method, interviewing, also did so in a variety of ways: Don’s approach was ethnographic, in accordance with his anthropological orientation to “fieldwork;” Sharon’s was therapeutic, with her primary motivation being to help people who had gone through a traumatic contact experience; Jon’s (and Mark’s, to some degree) was journalistic—concerned with getting “the facts.”

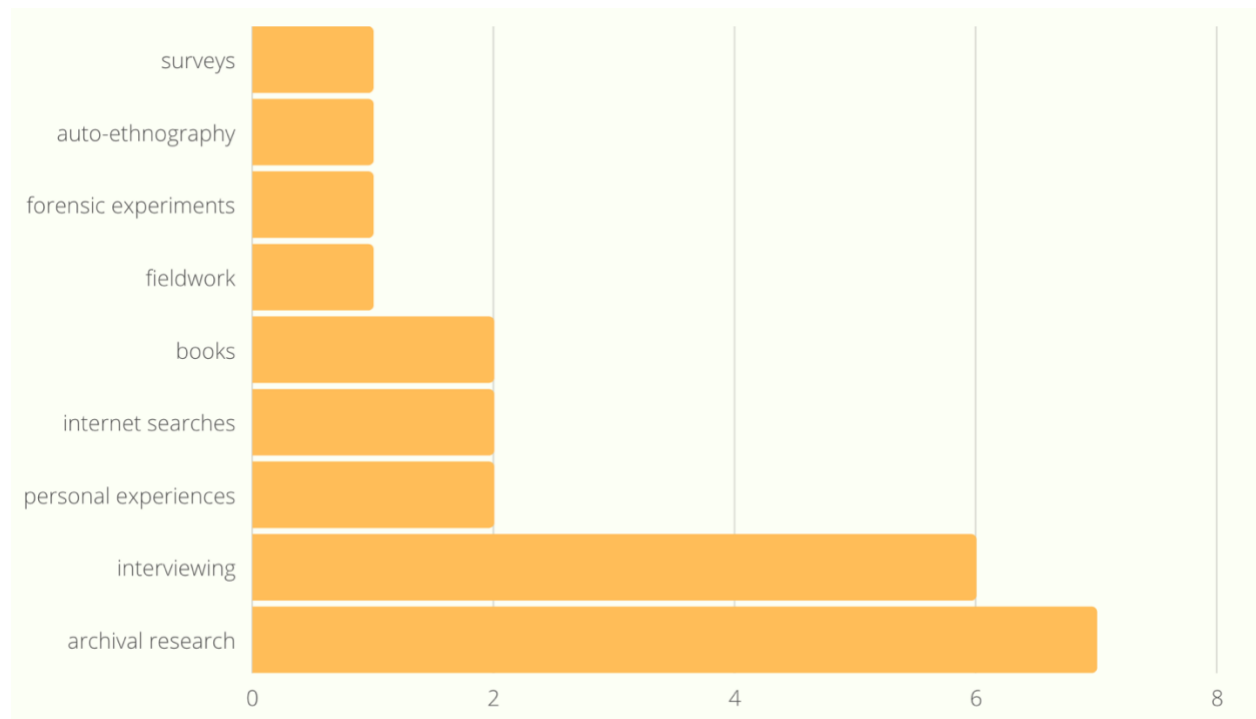


Figure 5.4: Dimension 3: Methods

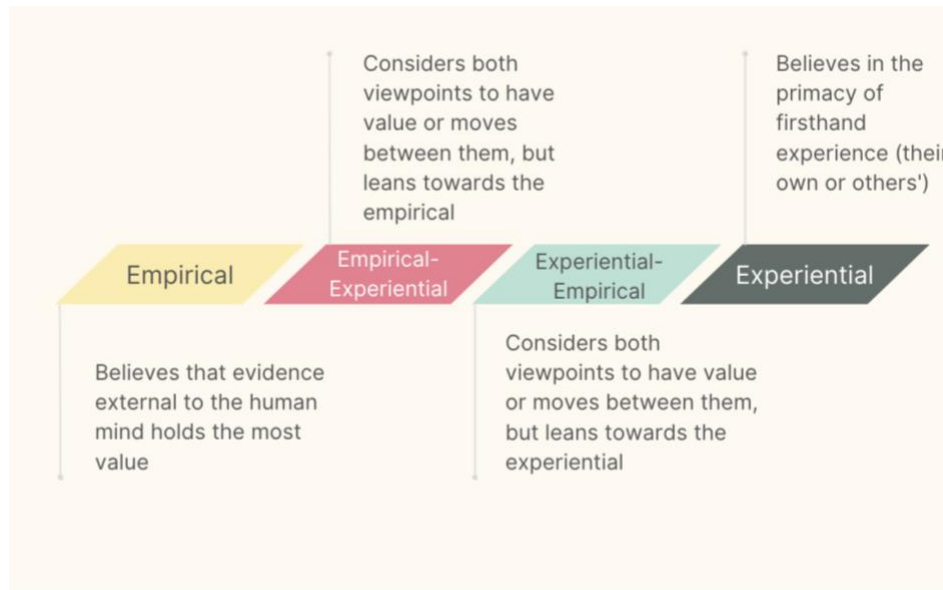


Figure 5.5: Dimension 6: Epistemology

Just as in academia, epistemic and methodological conflicts take place in different areas of research, which is particularly evident in ufology. Both experiential and empirical ufologists rejected the “new age” approach that seemed “out there” to both camps. Yet, empirical ufology habitually lumps experiential ufology into the new age, treating any claim of contact with extraterrestrials with skepticism. Experiential ufologists thus feel dismissed and belittled by the wider ufological landscape. Harriet, the only participant who seemed firmly experiential (see fig. 5.6), discussed this at length, often expressing that she was not sure if her perspective was dismissed because she was an experiencer/ communicator, because she was not American, because she was a woman, or a combination of all three. Ufology parallels other academic disciplines in a couple of ways. The empirical/experiential divide parallels (but does not directly map onto) the positivist/ interpretivist and quantitative/ qualitative divide in many of the social sciences. Furthermore, academia is a demonstrably sexist space.⁶⁰¹ As the oldest and most entrenched quasi-discipline among the three explored in this work, the parallels between counter-establishment ufology and establishment social science are evident.

⁶⁰¹ Karen Schucan Bird, “Do Women Publish Fewer Journal Articles than Men? Sex Differences in Publication Productivity in the Social Sciences,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 32, no. 6 (November 1, 2011): 921–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2011.596387>.

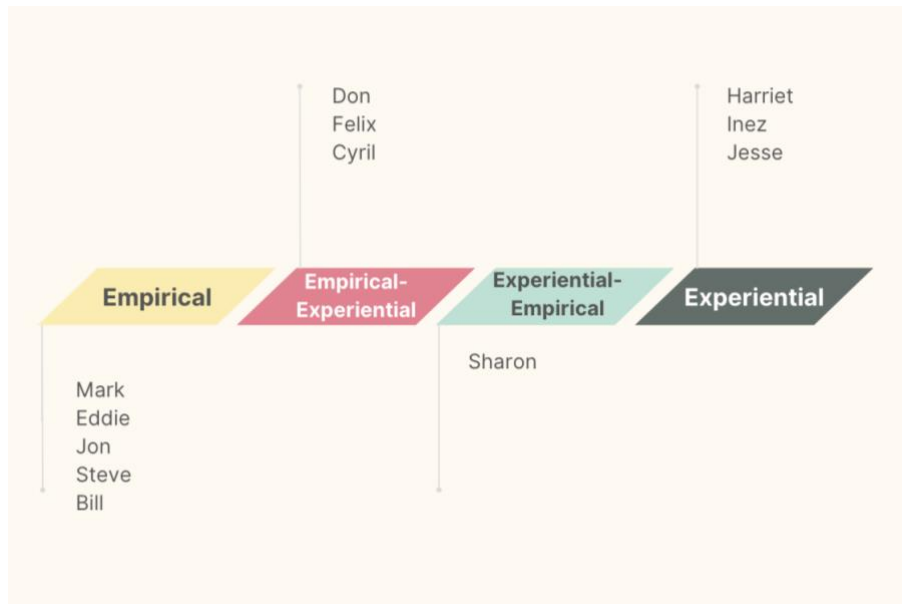


Figure 5.6: Mapping Participants onto Dimension 6: Epistemology

For participants who have experienced being called a conspiracy theorist, it is hurtful and does nothing to change their epistemic outlook or their interest in certain topics. It can be something that significantly affects their day-to-day experience and their self-perception, and as many pointed out, can feel emotionally damaging and draining. Some participants displayed typical or expected conspiratorial worldviews, including mistrust of authority, expertise, and institutions, but not all did. Indeed, some displayed notable reflexivity, demonstrating that it is possible for people who research topics that have been labeled “conspiracy theories” to be reflexive. I have not included visualizations of dimension four (practices and conceptualizations) or dimension five (identity), because they are so heterogeneous as to not lend themselves readily to visualization.⁶⁰² People and topics being systematically excluded from the academy also results in them refusing to identify with the academy—Mark, for example, called himself a “non-academic non-elite” despite holding a PhD.

⁶⁰² See the tables in Appendix C for more detail on these two dimensions, as they manifest for each researcher.

Classifying people according to their epistemic viewpoints, and making value judgements about those viewpoints solely because they differ from our own, solidifies conspiracy theorists' identities as outsiders. Recalling Hacking's notion of *looping human kinds*: "To create new ways of classifying people is also to change how we can think of ourselves, to change our sense of self-worth, even how we remember our own past. This in turn generates a looping effect, because people of the kind behave differently and so are different. That is to say the kind changes..."⁶⁰³ Having been rejected from the academy, counter-establishment researchers may both desire acceptance from academia and reject that desire. The lack of support for counter-establishment research makes the barriers to entry higher, only allowing for those who are the most passionate or the most privileged to engage in such research. This could mean that important perspectives are missed. It can be prohibitively expensive to do research that is unsupported by a university. As we saw with Don's archaeological dig at Roswell, a TV production company needed to become involved before they could conduct the dig in its entirety. This could loop the kind again, so to speak: ufology becomes unserious because it is funded by a production company, but that is the only way the research can get done.

I asked most participants what their thoughts were on the other two theories in this project. That is, I asked JFK researchers their thoughts on UFOs and Missing 411, Ufologists what their opinions were on Missing 411 and JFK, etc. Figure 5.7 shows that counter-establishment JFK theories were the most readily believed. However, this chart illustrates that while belief in counter-establishment JFK or Missing 411 theories *may* result in belief in UFO theories, it is just as likely not to. Many researchers were not comfortable giving their opinions on the other two areas of research, since they felt that they had not conducted an adequate amount of research to give an opinion.

⁶⁰³ Ian Hacking, *The Looping Effects of Human Kinds*, 369.

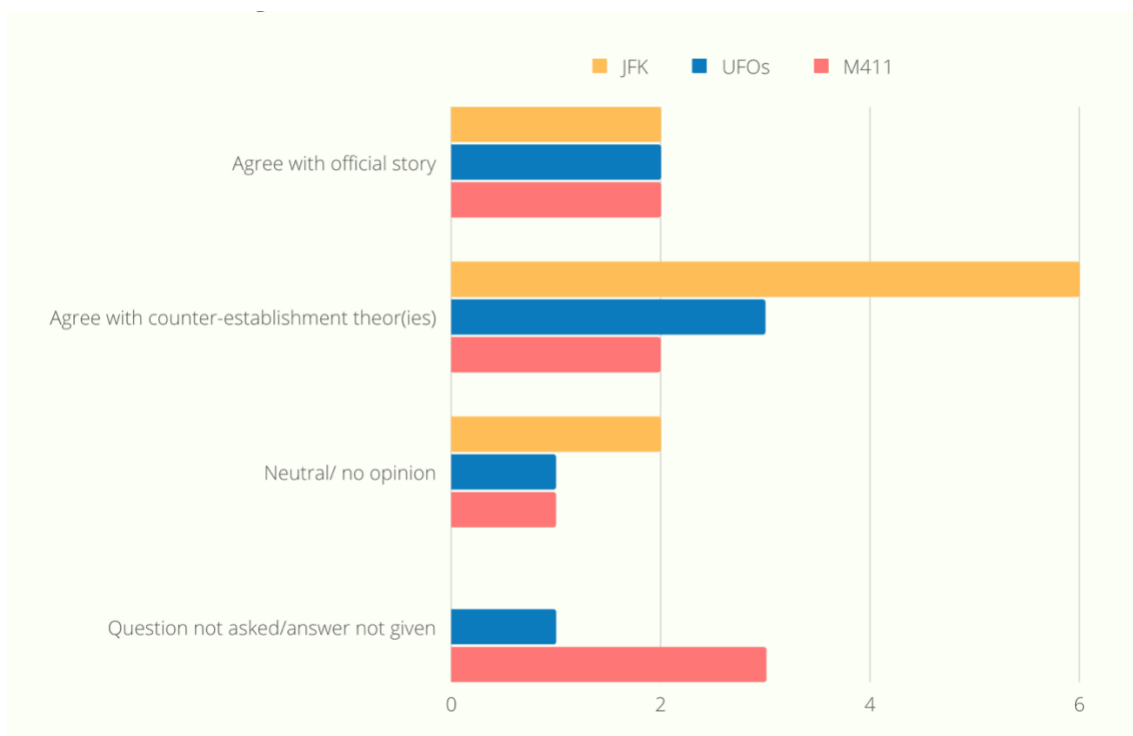


Figure 5.7: Answers to the question “What do you think about the other two theories?”

Despite my attempts to establish a new way of conceptualizing research that takes structural forces into account, the Research Self as it stands now remains markedly behavioral and individualized. Counter-establishment research also must be examined and characterized according to the institutions and systems that shape it. Further research will examine counter-establishment research as it relates to structures of race and gender. We saw somewhat how these topics become gendered in the same way that social science is gendered; they are also likely racialized in the same way that social science is racialized (re: inhospitable to people of color).

Quite a few scholars have investigated whiteness as it functions within ufology specifically, including Christopher F. Roth,⁶⁰⁴ Jodi Dean,⁶⁰⁵ and Susan Lepselter.⁶⁰⁶ Roth traces whiteness through the

⁶⁰⁴ Roth, “Ufology as Anthropology: Race, Extraterrestrials, and the Occult.”

⁶⁰⁵ Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*.

⁶⁰⁶ Lepselter, *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

history of ufology, analyzing ufology as a kind of anthropology, with the requisite history of categorizing extraterrestrial *others* in racialized terms. Early UFO sightings, especially contactee literature, are rooted in nineteenth-century occultist schools of thought: most directly, Theosophy. Theosophy is a “revealed religion,” based on occult ideas, in which the sacred texts were delivered to the leaders by “Ascended Masters.” The ideas of Theosophy continued to shape occult religions throughout the twentieth century. In Roth’s words, “Most of the vocabulary of the New Age—auras, astral projection, chakras, spirit guides, gurus, the Age of Aquarius—can be traced directly to Theosophical writers.”⁶⁰⁷ Looking expressly at the contactee literature, he notes that there is a noticeable shift from theosophical interest in South Asia and its religions, to an orientation towards futuristic technology, and a seeming obsession with the role of the United States and white people in general in global politics and history.⁶⁰⁸ Before publishing on his contactee experiences, George Adamski, the first contactee, published Theosophical texts. Once established as a contactee, he kept his previous Theosophical work separate, arguably hidden, from his readers in the UFO community. Adamski’s descriptions of the first “space brother” he meets, name Orthon, are in racialized and gendered terms: the alien had “slightly higher cheekbones than an Occidental, but not so high as an Indian or an Oriental...” Adamski is also struck by Orthon’s androgyny, “...in different clothing, he could have easily passed for an unusually beautiful woman; yet he definitely was a man...”⁶⁰⁹ Roth notes that Orthon is extremely similar in description, down to the racialized mix of Nordic and “oriental” features, to the Theosophical Ascended Masters. George Hunt Williamson, witness to Adamski’s original contact, who also wrote extensively within the purview of the contactee literature, categorized other types of alien races in explicitly antisemitic terms.⁶¹⁰ Roth notes that contactee literature and racialized descriptions of aliens “quietly shaped” the language and literature of ufology for decades to come.

⁶⁰⁷ Roth, “Ufology as Anthropology: Race, Extraterrestrials, and the Occult,” 45.

⁶⁰⁸ Roth, “Ufology as Anthropology: Race, Extraterrestrials, and the Occult,” 58.

⁶⁰⁹ Roth, “Ufology as Anthropology: Race, Extraterrestrials, and the Occult,” 52.

⁶¹⁰ Roth, “Ufology as Anthropology: Race, Extraterrestrials, and the Occult,” 56.

Susan Lepselter elaborates on this, pointing to the fact that the U.S.'s history of enslavement and genocide is rarely discussed within American ufological circles, let alone broader conceptions of race and class. Yet, "disturbing free-floating after-images of enslavement and colonization remain, gathering in distorted forms, in discourses from people with no direct birthright to those traumatic histories."⁶¹¹ In her 2016 book, *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*, Lepselter's overarching project is reading alien abduction narratives in terms of 19th-century published accounts of white women who were kidnapped by Native Americans, along axes of power, race, and class. Comparing the two: "In the older story it is the Indian who is the savage, the devil...the strong-bodied but, ultimately, technology-weak other. It is also the Indian who is the abductor...In terms of narrative identification, the abductee has traded places: once the captor was less technological, more 'natural,' but it is now the captive who claims 'native' rights to the place that is being invaded—the earth."⁶¹² She also points out that captivity by the "savage" is easily put into dramatized, narrative terms, with a beginning and an ending. However, captivity by the state is less easily captured by narrative terms, and it becomes much easier for the state itself to frame its actions as benevolent: "health, sanitation, progress, enlightenment."⁶¹³ Further, Lepselter suggests that white women's captivity narratives were always implicitly about gendered power relations within white society, rather than the imperialist power relations between white settler colonialists and indigenous groups.⁶¹⁴ White women's Indian captivity narratives were thus entirely about *whiteness* and white culture. To what extent are UFO abduction narratives, and by extension, ufology itself, also about whiteness?

The specter of colonialism also exists in the Missing 411 literature. In *Missing 411: The Hunted*, Jeanie Chapel, the resident historian at the Crazy Mountain Museum, states that: "There are several versions of why the crazy mountains are called "crazy." The one I believe is that it's a curse from the Crow Indians. Because this used to be Crow reservation, and when they were moved off the land the

⁶¹¹ Lepselter, *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*, 43.

⁶¹² Lepselter, *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*, 62.

⁶¹³ Lepselter, *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*, 49.

⁶¹⁴ Lepselter, *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*, 54.

Crow Indians supposedly put a curse on the Crazy Mountains for the wind to blow and drive the white man crazy.” This statement is presented in the documentary uncritically, and Chapel’s words are juxtaposed with footage of the mountain range looking forbidding, with ominous music playing. Overall, this statement echoes the horror trope of native land that has been cursed and results in “danger, madness, and freak turns of nature.”⁶¹⁵ Usually it is a house or a smaller section of land, but in this case, Chapel claims the entire mountain range has been cursed by the Crow people. Further, she states that the mountains used to be “Crow reservation.” In fact, the Crow were historical stewards of the land in that area; the reservation system was an oppressive system set up by white colonizers. The Absaroka (“Crow”), were moved *from* the area around the Crazy Mountains *to* a reservation in Southern Montana.

In his analysis of the literary trope of cursed Indian lands, Darryl V. Catherine suggests that “Heavily indebted to New England Puritan mythology, beliefs in the accursed dimension of nature stem from the conflation of the devil with Native Americans and their territories. While the Puritans fought to displace Indians and colonize their lands, [H.P] Lovecraft and [Jay] Anson readers imagined themselves occupying demon-saturated Indian landscapes, assuming for themselves the status of indigenous Americans.”⁶¹⁶ A white person re-placing of themselves into another racial identity that feels more *sacred* and therefore more significant and in line with one’s beliefs recalls some New Age ufology practices outlined by Roth above. White individuals are often able to, through considering themselves or their children to have alien ancestry (“star children”) and/or, more commonly, claiming indigenous ancestry, claim a kind of sacred identity that makes them unique among other white individuals. This is merely one manifestation of the mythologized figure of the “American Indian.” The figure of the “Crow Indian” evoked in Chapel’s quotation from *The Hunted* is a mythologized version of the Native who is powerful and tapped into dangerous paranormal energies. Catherine elaborates on this mythologized figure:

Since the early eighteenth century, the fantastic Indians invented by white Americans remain indispensable to the latter’s rhetoric of cultural sovereignty. To invoke their presence...is to lay claim to white inheritance of American territory as “a gift outright”

⁶¹⁵ Darryl V. Catherine, “Heirs through Fear,” *Nova Religio* 18, no. 1 (August 1, 2014): 37–57, <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2014.18.1.37>.

⁶¹⁶ Catherine, “Heirs through Fear.”

or a rightful possession under siege. The American fascination with the paranormal is seldom just a religious interest in generic “nature” or the object of scientific inquiry. It is invariably part of a larger discourse about national origins in a culturally inscribed American nature. In their sundry guises as local folklore, mass-media trope and doctrine of Protestant belief, present-day legends of accursed Indian lands exemplify the “new supernatural”—literary in inspiration, deinstitutionalized in practice, and paranormal in content—weaving together myths found throughout colonial and modern American history.⁶¹⁷

Essentially, Chapel’s regurgitation of the mass-media trope of cursed Indian land masquerades as folklore and plays into the paranormal implications made by Paulides in his documentaries. This Native figure is a specter, invented by the white imagination, and whose existence and weaponization serves only to further colonialist agendas, often without the knowledge of the white individual retelling these legends, like Chapel. Such ghosts of the white imagination serve to solidify the notion of the Native-as-sinister, conferring upon him a power that evens the playing field, so to speak, between white colonizers and indigenous groups—a classic racist trope used to justify oppression and genocide.

Racism and white supremacy are so deeply structural in American society that almost all disciplines and areas of research are necessarily rooted in it, counter-establishment and establishment alike. These topics are not particularly steeped in racism or colonialism, but it is important to highlight the areas in which all areas of research are rooted in white supremacy. Library and archival science are themselves rooted in extremely robust structures of colonization and white supremacy,⁶¹⁸ not to mention ableism,⁶¹⁹ homophobia and transphobia.⁶²⁰ Undeniably, there is a current of whiteness at the core of these three topics.

Further research into the structures of whiteness and maleness at work in counter-establishment research could examine the financial pieces at work behind these areas of research. Who is making money off of counter-establishment research? Who is spending their money on it? Who has the time and agency

⁶¹⁷ Caterine, “Heirs through Fear.”

⁶¹⁸ Michele R. Santamaria, “Concealing White Supremacy through Fantasies of the Library: Economies of Affect at Work,” *Library Trends* 68, no. 3 (2020): 431–49, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2020.0000>.

⁶¹⁹ Gracen Brilmyer, “Archival Assemblages: Applying Disability Studies’ Political/Relational Model to Archival Description,” *Archival Science* 18, no. 2 (June 1, 2018): 95–118, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-018-9287-6>.

⁶²⁰ Emily Drabinski, “Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction,” *The Library Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 94–111, <https://doi.org/10.1086/669547>.

to devote to counter-establishment research? Financial gain is an aspect of dimension 2 (motivations) that I did not have time to examine, but it could be a particularly enlightening way to examine structures of race and gender within counter-establishment research. Other areas of deeper inquiry could include changes in research practice over time, and changes in belief over time (for instance, Inez used to believe in 9/11 conspiracy theories). Furthermore, I did not have the space in this dissertation to delve deeply into the dynamics within research communities. Ethnographic work within counter-establishment research communities could produce highly rich data that would produce an even more nuanced portrait of counter-establishment research than the one I have presented here.

This dissertation demonstrates that counter-establishment research is highly epistemically and methodologically varied. It also shows that shaming, pathologizing and using the term “conspiracy theorist” to do so is no longer helpful, particularly for counter-establishment areas of research. We as academics must build bridges with people in the counter-establishment research world. Discussing research with my interviewees helped me immensely in my practices of researcher reflexivity. Not only do we have something to offer them, but they have much to offer us.

Appendix A

THE CONSPIRACY CHART 2021

DETACHED FROM REALITY

QAnon **DEEP STATE** **FLAT EARTH** **PROTOCOLS OF THE ELDERS OF ZION** **ILLUMINATI** **REPTILIAN OVERLORDS** **HOLOCAUST DENIAL**
GREAT REPLACEMENT **Secret Satanic Rituals** **GEORGE SOROS** **SANDY HOOK FAKE** **ADRENOCHROME**
Hollow Earth **NEW WORLD ORDER** **"TRANS AGENDA"** **"CULTURAL MARXISM"** **Rothschild Central Bank** **BILL GATES depopulation**
Nazis on the moon **PIZZAGATE** **GEORGE FLOYD CRISIS ACTOR** **JEWISH SPACE LASERS** **HOLLYWOOD IS TURNING YOUR KIDS BAT** **NESARA**

WORLD RULED BY SUPREME SHADOW ELITE. PROMOTES HATRED AND VIOLENCE TOWARD MARGINALIZED GROUPS.

THE ANTISEMITIC POINT OF NO RETURN

Tartaria **Antifa did Jan 6th** **RFID tracking devices in bras** **VACCINES HAVE MICROCHIPS** **PLANDEMIC** **WayFair trafficking** **Essential oils cure all illnesses**
Jet fuel doesn't melt steel beams **U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION WAS STOLEN** **GLOBAL WARMING HOAX** **IVERMECTIN CURES COVID** **Moon landing FAKE** **ANCIENT GIANT TREES** **Feral people in forests**
PHANTOM TIME **SOY BOYS** **5G is toxic** **Iraqi Dinar scam** **COVID is a bioweapon** **BIDEN IS A ROBOT** **CHEMTRAILS**

DANGEROUS TO YOURSELF AND OTHERS

REALITY DENIAL

Avril Lavigne replaced **Greta Thunberg is a time traveller** **STEVIE WONDER ISN'T BLIND** **ELVIS LIVES**
MICHAEL JACKSON STILL ALIVE **MATTRESS FIRM MONEY LAUNDERING SCHEME** **Credit @tofoLOGY** **CRYPTIDS** **KYLIE JENNER IS A CLONE** **TITANIC NEVER SANK**
Ted Cruz is the Zodiac Killer **Alien abductions** **PRINCE CHARLES VAMPIRE** **Tupac alive in Serbia**

UNEQUIVOCALLY FALSE BUT MOSTLY HARMLESS

LEAVING REALITY

JIMMY HOFFA DISAPPEARANCE **WE LIVE IN A SIMULATION** **JFK ASSASSINATION**
Denver Int'l Airport **Charles Manson CIA asset** **AREA 51**
EPSTEIN DIDN'T KILL HIMSELF **UFOs**

WE HAVE QUESTIONS

SPECULATION LINE

COINTELPRO **Big Tobacco lied about cancer**
Big Oil pushed Climate Disinfo **NSA mass surveillance**
Watergate **FBI SPIED ON MLK**
TUSKEGEE EXPERIMENT **Project Mockingbird**
Operation Paperclip **NAVIRAH TESTIMONY**
#freebritney **MKUltra**

THINGS THAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED

Credit @tofoLOGY

GROUNDING IN REALITY

Figure 1: The Conspiracy Chart, by Abbie Richards, 2021.



Figure 2: The Conspiracy Chart, by Abbie Richards, Detail.

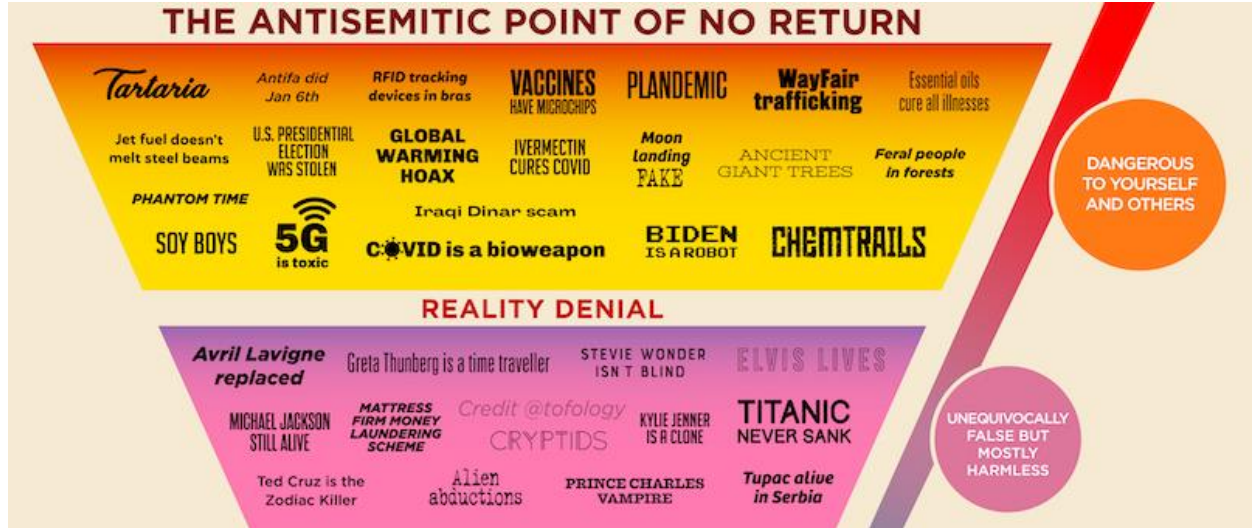


Figure 3: The Conspiracy Chart, by Abbie Richards, Detail.

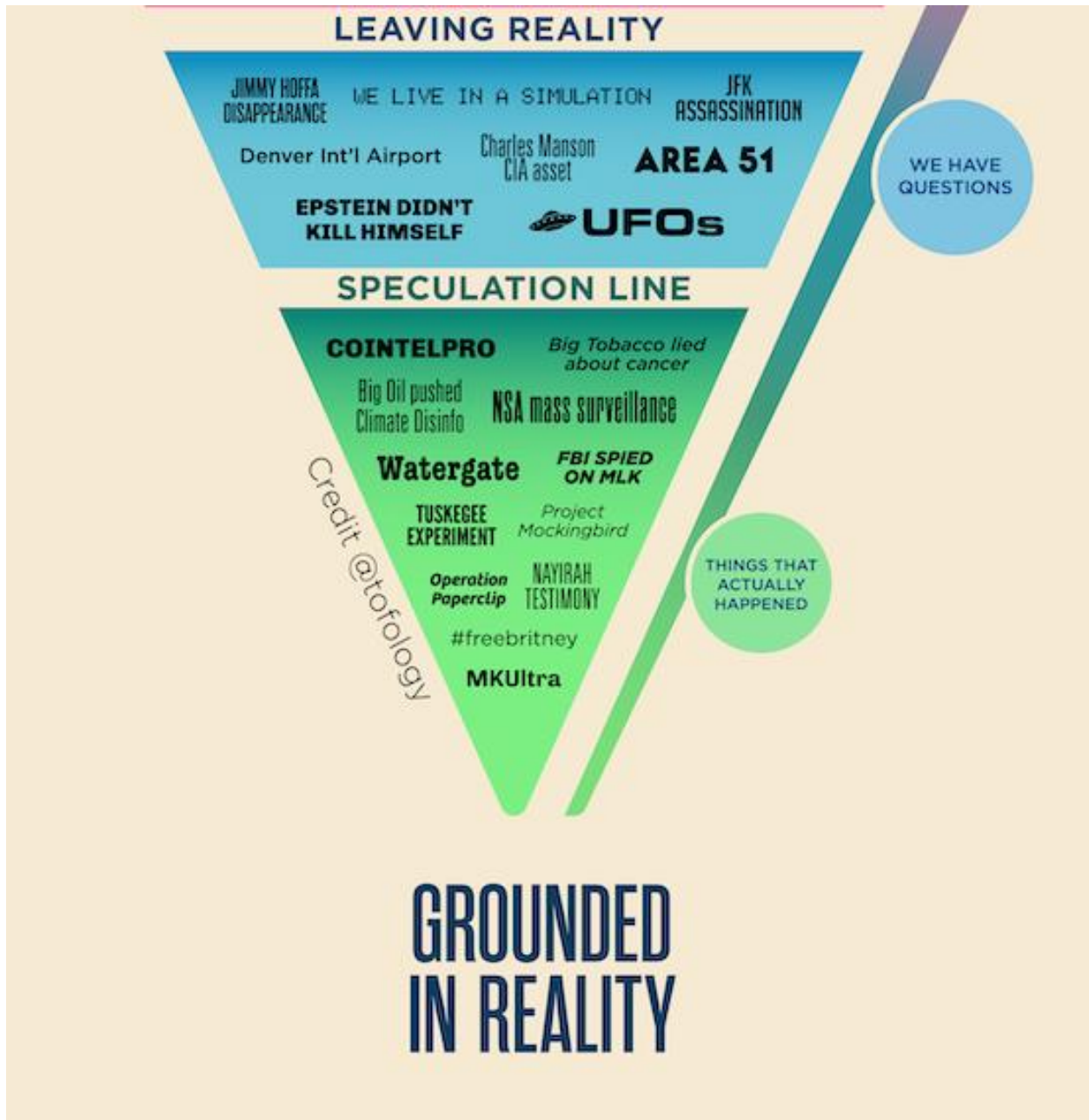


Figure 4: The Conspiracy Chart, by Abbie Richards, Detail.

Appendix B

UCLA Research Study Information Sheet

Yvonne M. Eadon, PhD candidate, and Dr. Sarah T. Roberts, in the Department of Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), are conducting a research study.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are an individual who regularly searches for information and/ or conducts research about the assassination of John F. Kenendy. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

This study will constitute the first few steps in establishing researchers who are interested in subjects that have been traditionally labeled as “conspiracy theories” as a researcher group within archives, libraries, and online (current user group name is “conspiracist researchers”).

What will happen if I take part in this research study?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Participate in two forty-five minute to an hour-and-fifteen-minute-long interviews over the course of two to three weeks.
- All interviews will be conducted remotely, using videoconferencing software (Zoom), or via phone. Interviews will be recorded and the recordings destroyed upon transcription.
- Interview questions will be about how you became interested in the JFK assassination, how you conduct research or search for information, what your experiences have been like within libraries and archives.

How long will I be in the research study?

Participation will take a total of about three hours over the course of one week. Follow-up interviews may be requested via email. Participation in follow-up interviews, like initial interviews, is fully voluntary.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

- There are no potential risks or discomforts.

Are there any potential benefits if I participate?

This research will help archivists, librarians, other information professionals, and scholars of these disciplines, to understand the specific needs of conspiracist researchers. Ultimately, this research will contribute to the information studies literature

around reference and knowledge organization, so that conspiracist researchers may feel more at home or welcome within information institutions.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of the use of pseudonyms for your institution as well as yourself, unless you would like to be named as a research participant. After recordings are transcribed by the researcher, they will be destroyed.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

- **The research team:**

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact:

Principal Investigator Yvonne M. Eadon
ymeadon@gmail.com
661-312-7880

- **UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):**

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040; by email: participants@research.ucla.edu or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

Please keep this information sheet for your personal records.

Figure 1: First draft of consent document, featuring “conspiracist researchers” language

UCLA Research Study Information Sheet

Yvonne M. Eadon, PhD candidate, and Dr. Sarah T. Roberts, in the Department of Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), are conducting a research study.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are an individual who regularly searches for information and/ or conducts research about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

This study seeks to understand research practices and community customs around three distinct research topics: the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Roswell Incident of 1947, and the Missing 411 phenomenon. Traditionally and pejoratively labeled "conspiratorial" topics by some, this study seeks to understand how, if at all, this labeling may affect the research process.

What will happen if I take part in this research study?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Participate in two forty-five minute to an hour-and-fifteen-minute-long interviews over the course of two to three weeks.
- All interviews will be conducted remotely, using videoconferencing software (Zoom), or via phone. Interviews will be recorded and the recordings destroyed upon transcription.
- Interview questions will be about how you became interested in the JFK assassination, how you conduct research or search for information, what your experiences have been like within libraries and archives.

How long will I be in the research study?

Participation will take a total of about three hours over the course of two weeks. Follow-up interviews may be requested via email. Participation in follow-up interviews, like initial interviews, is fully voluntary.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

- There are no potential risks or discomforts.

Are there any potential benefits if I participate?

This research will help archivists, librarians, other information professionals, and scholars of these disciplines, to understand the specific needs of researchers interested

in the three topics listed above. Ultimately, this research will contribute to the information studies literature around reference and knowledge organization, so that researchers who look into topics that have been labeled “conspiratorial” can feel more welcome and comfortable within information institutions.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of the use of pseudonyms for your institution as well as yourself, unless you would like to be named as a research participant. After recordings are transcribed by the researcher, they will be destroyed.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

• **The research team:**

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, please contact:

Principal Investigator Yvonne M. Eadon
ymeadon@gmail.com
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Please keep this information sheet for your personal records.

Figure 2: Second draft/revision of consent document, removing “conspiracist researchers” language

Interview Protocol

I will be using grounded theory and conducting semi-structured interviews, so the questions listed in this schedule may not be asked exactly as they appear written here. I would like for research participants to be able to talk about their feelings on the subject of my research without much intervention on my part. This study is exploratory; the data collected in the course of these interviews will inform future research.

The following questions are divided into first and second interview session questions. Each interview will be forty-five minutes to an hour and fifteen minutes long. The two sessions will allow for in-depth interviewing of the research participants. I am modifying the intensive three-interview series from Seidman (2006), forgoing the first life history interview and shortening the duration of the interviews.

First, are you comfortable with me recording this interview?

Thank you so much for participating in this interview!

So, this is the first of two sessions--is that alright with you? Will you be able to join me for a second session? Each of them should only be about 45 minutes to an hour long. This first interview session will cover the your background, research practices with regard to the JFK assassination/ UFOs/ Missing 411, broad conceptions of your research habits, and feelings you experience in the course of doing research. The second interview session will cover experiences with information institutions (online and offline), trust in resources, and how you self-identify as a researcher.

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Interview Session 1

1. Tell me about how you came to be interested in researching the JFK assassination/ UFOs/ Missing 411.
2. When did you first become interested in the JFK assassination/ UFOs/ Missing 411? What sparked your interest?
3. Could you tell me about your thoughts and feelings when you first started researching the JFK assassination/ UFOs/ Missing 411?
4. If you are a part of any groups of researchers looking into this topic, online or in person, can you describe them?
5. Tell me about how you go about conducting research.
 - a. Where do you go to get started with your research?
 - b. When you are starting out researching a new topic, how do you feel?
 - c. Where do you do most of your research? Libraries? Archives? Online?
 - d. When you are in the midst of researching, how do you feel?

- e. When, if ever, do you feel like you have finished researching a specific topic?
- 6. Have you researched other topics that could be considered “conspiracy theories” or the like?
 - a. How do you think about the term “conspiracy theory”—that is, how do you define it?
- 7. Is there something you would like to add that I didn’t ask about?
- 8. Is there something else I should know to understand the research process into the JFK assassination/ UFOs/ Missing 411 better?
- 9. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Interview Session 2

- 1. How do you think the research community you found shaped your research?
- 2. What are your feelings about libraries, in general?
- 3. What are your feelings about archives, in general?
- 4. Can you describe any specific experiences at libraries or archives that have stood out to you?
- 5. Tell me about your experience at the Sixth Floor Museum/ the International UFO Museum and Research Center/ the Center for UFO Studies.
- 6. What sources of information do you trust?
- 7. Why do you trust these resources?
- 8. What could librarians and archivists do differently when helping you and people with similar research questions?
- 9. What are your thoughts and feelings about the term “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist”?
 - a. How do you define these terms?
- 10. Have you ever been labeled as a “conspiracy theorist”? If so, how does that make you feel?
- 11. What do you want from an info professional?
- 12. What advice would you give to someone who is just starting to become interested in researching the JFK assassination/ UFOs/ Missing 411?
- 13. Is there something you would like to add that I didn’t ask about?
- 14. Is there something you would like to ask me?

Figure 3: Interview Protocol submitted to UCLA IRB

Thank you so much for participating in this interview! As I told you via email, this is my dissertation research, and I am incredibly honored that you are taking the time to be a part of it.

Did you get a chance to read the document I sent? Do you have any questions about it? Do you consent to the interview?

And I'm recording this interview--is that alright with you?

So I normally do two sessions with each person I talk to, will you be able to join me for a second session? Each of them should only be about 45 minutes to an hour long.

1. 1. Could you tell me a bit about yourself and your background?
2. Tell me about how you came to be interested in UFO phenomena.
3. Could you tell me about your thoughts and feelings when you first started researching
4. this topic?
5. 4. Could you tell me more about your **current** work with UFO Focus New Zealand?
 - a. How does UFO research work in Australia and NZ, how do you think it is similar or different from UFO research that is done in the States?
6. **3. Could you describe the research landscape when you first got started? How has it changed since then?**
7. 5. Can you tell me a bit about how you think about evidence? Are there certain kinds of evidence
8. that you find to be more convincing than others?
9. 6. Tell me about how you go about conducting research into a specific UFO encounter.
 - a. a. Where do you go to get started with your research?
 - b. b. When you are starting out researching a new area, how do you feel?
 - c. c. Where do you do most of your research? Libraries? Archives? Online?
 - d. d. When you are in the midst of researching, how do you feel?
 - e. e. When, if ever, do you feel like you have finished researching a specific topic?
10. What are your thoughts about being a woman in UFO research?

Conclusions

11. Is there something you would like to add that I didn't ask about?
12. Is there something else I should know to understand the research process into the JFK assassination better?
13. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

SESSION 2

1. ›So first off I have to ask everyone this, would you like your name to be kept confidential or would you like to be named as a participant?
1. Tell me about how you go about conducting research into a specific UFO encounter. Can you take me through that process?
 - a. a. Where do you go to get started with your research?

- b. b. When you are starting out researching a new area, how do you feel?
 - c. c. Where do you do most of your research? Libraries? Archives? Online?
 - d. d. When you are in the midst of researching, how do you feel?
 - e. e. When, if ever, do you feel like you have finished researching a specific topic?
 - f. What kinds of feelings do you experience in the course of conducting research? Can you describe how you feel at the beginning, middle, and end of a given research project?
 - g. How important is space/ place when you go to interview someone who's had a sighting or a close encounter?
 - h. Do you work with a specific sheet that you have people fill out about their sightings?
2. You talk about specific "indicators" and "triggers" that suggest to you that an interviewee is telling the truth. Can you tell me more about what those are?
 3. **You mentioned there are three women in an international UFO research group you are a part of. Three out of how many?**
 4. **What is your opinion about physical evidence of UFOs, as opposed to witness evidence?**
 5. **What are your feelings about the media and journalism, in general?**
 6. **What are your feelings about academia and science, in general?**
 7. **What are your feelings about current earth technology in context of what you've seen on board crafts?**
 8. What are you feelings about libraries and archives, in general?
 - a. Can you tell me more about your plans for the archival material you currently have? Is any of it available online? Will it be scanned or donated anywhere else?
 - b. What are your feelings about government archives?
 - c. What could librarians and archivists do differently when helping you and people with similar research questions?
 - 9.
 10. **What are your thoughts and feelings about the term "conspiracy theory" and "conspiracy theorist"?**
 - a. **How do you define these terms?**
 11. **I'm very interested in how the label of 'conspiracy theorist' can affect the research process. Have you ever been labeled as a "conspiracy theorist"?**
 - a. **If so, how did it make you feel?**
 12. **What is your opinion/ perspective on the JFK assassination?**
 13. **What is your opinion/ perspective on the Missing 411 phenomenon?**
 14. Is there something you would like to add that I didn't ask about?
 15. Is there something else I should know to understand the research process into the JFK assassination better?
 16. Is there anything you would like to ask me?
 17. Finally, would you like to be kept anonymous? I'll give you a pseudonym if so.

Figure 4: Sample Interview Protocol, with notes/ follow-up questions

- Codes
 - Archives & Libraries (& museums)
 - Conspiracy - related--direct
 - Deep Dive
 - Difficult to categorize
 - Dualities
 - Real & Unreal
 - Epistemology
 - encountering silences
 - Evidence & proof
 - Knowing & not knowing
 - knowing & knowledge
 - Not knowing
 - Legitimacy & illegitimacy
 - Quality of information
 - Having an impact
 - Internet
 - JFK
 - M411
 - Methodology
 - Other two topics
 - Relationship to academic or serious research
 - Relationship to journalism & media
 - Research - general
 - Research feelings
 - Storytelling or mythmaking
 - Test
 - UFOs
 - Experiencers
 - Interpreting evidence as [extraterrestrial]
 - Interviewing witnesses
 - Landings
 - Looking for community

Figure 5: Second-level focused codes

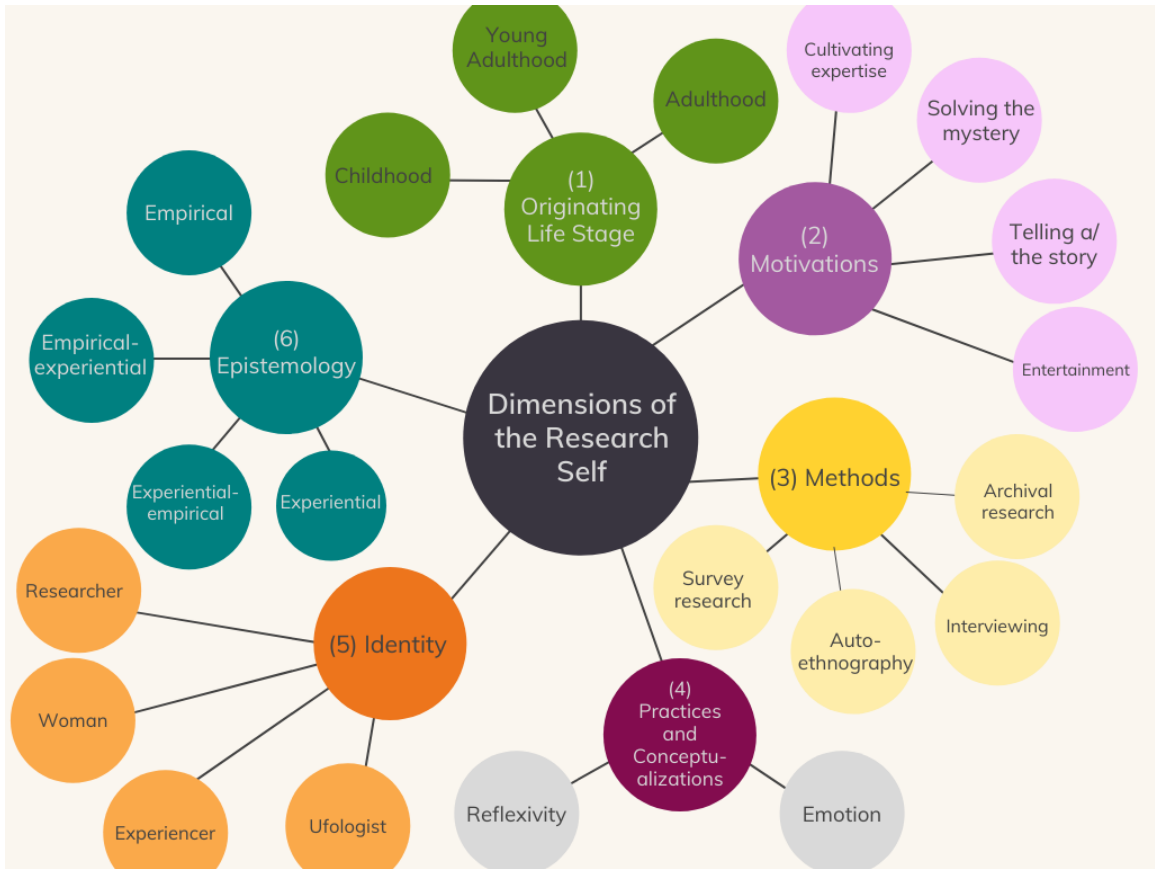


Figure 6: Dimensions of the Research Self

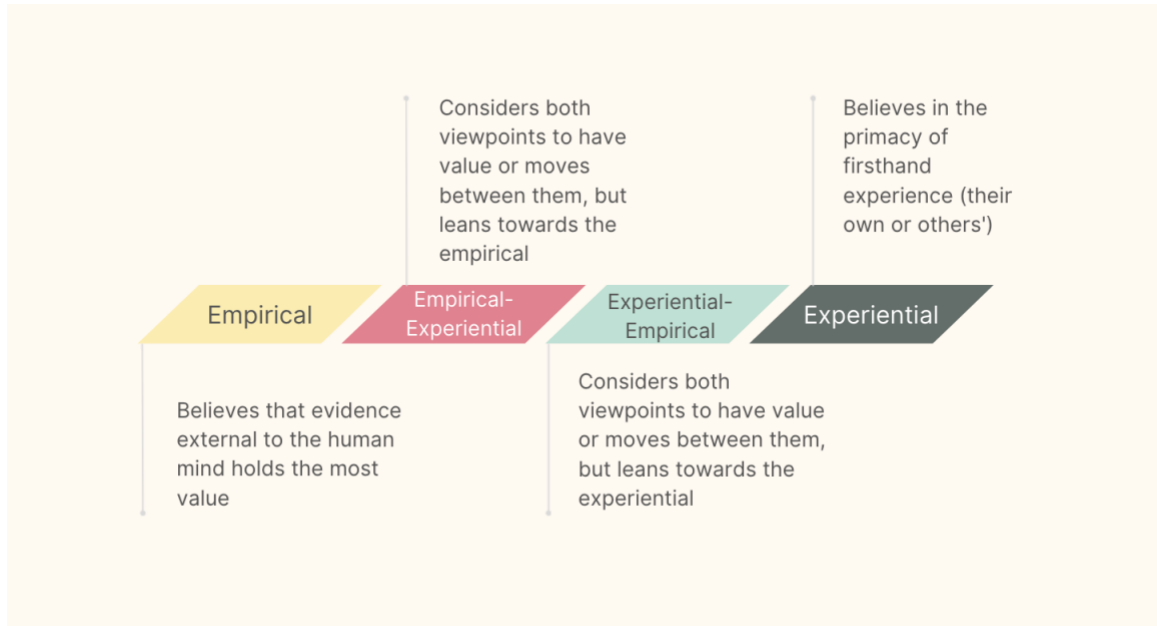


Figure 7: Dimension 6 (Epistemology) Spectrum

Appendix C

Mark	UFO Researcher					
Dimension 1 (originating life stage)	childhood					
Dimension 2 (motivations)	making a contribution to the field	getting UFO research taken seriously	producing scholarly outputs			
Dimension 3 (methods)	survey research	interviewing	archival research			
Dimension 4 (practices and conceptualizations)	disconnected from emotion	highly dedicated & expects the same from others	more open minded than the average person	"Academic-y approach"	passionate/ takes the research seriously	highly productive
Dimension 5 (identity)	outsider ("non-elite non-academic")	researcher	ufologist	generalist		
Dimension 6 (epistemology)	empirical					

Eddie	UFO Researcher				
Dimension 1 (originating life stage)	childhood				
Dimension 2 (motivations)	making a contribution	enjoys going on the hunt			
Dimension 3 (methods)	longitudinal archival research				
Dimension 4 (practices and conceptualizations)	highly dedicated	sees himself as "a scholarly researcher"	passionate/ takes the research seriously	highly productive	"research never gets old"
Dimension 5 (identity)	folklorist	historian	not a ufologist		
Dimension 6 (epistemology)	empirical				

Don	UFO Researcher				
Dimension 1 (originating life stage)	childhood				
Dimension 2	solving the	producing			

(motivations)	mystery	outputs (books)				
Dimension 3 (methods)	interviewing	"fieldwork"	archaeology			
Dimension 4 (practices and conceptualizations)	visual thinker	advocate for witnesses	not very reflexive	not comfortable discussing his own emotions	passionate / takes the research seriously	highly productive
Dimension 5 (identity)	ufologist	Roswell expert				
Dimension 6 (epistemology)	empirical-experiential					

Harriet	UFO Researcher					
Dimension 1 (originating life stage)	childhood (repressed memories)					
Dimension 2 (motivations)	to be recognized and validated within and outside of ufology	getting experiencers to be taken seriously	advancing humanity	convincing the public	connecting with other experiencers	
Dimension 3 (methods)	interviewing (writing approach)	auto-ethnography	archival research			

Dimension 4 (practices and conceptualizations)	"Dual knowledge"	values objectivity in interviewing	"indicator s and triggers"	connected to emotion	somewhat reflexive: "I'm this slightly freaky unknown quantity"	passionate / takes the research seriously
Dimension 5 (identity)	experiencer	researcher	woman	national identity	ufologist	
Dimension 6 (epistemology)	experiential					

Sharon	UFO Researcher						
Dimension 1 (originating life stage)	adulthood	family					
Dimension 2 (motivations)	helping witnesses	developing personal understanding	convincing the public				
Dimension 3 (methods)	interviewing (therapy approach)	archival research					
Dimension 4 (practices and conceptualizations)	therapist-interviewer	"Close Encounter	sees herself as	reflexive	"philosophically	connected to emotion	passionate / takes the

conceptualizations)		Package"	empathetic		minded"	(her own and her interviewees')	research seriously
Dimension 5 (identity)	hypnotherapist	out-of-the-box thinker	woman				
Dimension 6 (epistemology)	experiential-empirical						

Jon	M411/ UFO				
Dimension 1 (originating life stage)	adulthood				
Dimension 2 (motivations)	producing outputs	enjoys going on the hunt			
Dimension 3 (methods)	archival research	(journalistic) interviewing			
Dimension 4 (practices and conceptualizations)	worried about reputation	does not enjoy publication/ dissemination of research			
Dimension 5 (identity)	journalist	teacher	writer	"UFO guy" in certain	storyteller

				contexts	
Dimension 6 (epistemology)	empirical				

Inez	M411 Researcher					
Dimension 1 (originating life stage)	childhood	family				
Dimension 2 (motivations)	entertainment					
Dimension 3 (methods)	Internet searches	personal experiences (not quite autoethnogra phy)				
Dimension 4 (practices and conceptualizations)	very reflexive	skeptical and curious at the same time	considers herself observant	connected to emotion	passionate but casual	applies "academic standards"
Dimension 5 (identity)	woman	has a disability	curious person	out-of-the- box thinker		
Dimension 6 (epistemology)	experiential					

Jesse	M411 Researcher	
Dimension 1 (originating life stage)	childhood	
Dimension 2 (motivations)	entertainment	safety in wilderness
Dimension 3 (methods)	personal experiences	internet searches
Dimension 4 (practices and conceptualizations)	kinesthetic expertise	more casual
Dimension 5 (identity)	proficient hunter/tracker	not really a researcher
Dimension 6 (epistemology)	experiential	

Felix	M411 Researcher				
Dimension 1 (originating life stage)	childhood				
Dimension 2 (motivations)	developing personal understanding	entertainment			
Dimension 3 (methods)	internet searches	personal experience			
Dimension 4 (practices and conceptualizations)	"scientifically minded"	worried about reputation	primarily a "consumer of	more casual	somewhat reflexive

conceptualizations)			information"		
Dimension 5 (identity)	psychologist by training/ former academic				
Dimension 6 (epistemology)	empirical-experiential	He would prefer to be empirical, but there is not enough data for him to do so. So he must also be experiential.			

Steve	JFK Researcher		
Dimension 1 (originating life stage)	adulthood		
Dimension 2 (motivations)	storytelling	solving the mystery	enjoys going on the hunt
Dimension 3 (methods)	archival research	books	
Dimension 4 (practices and conceptualizations)	very reflexive	passionate/ takes the research seriously	often frustrated or overwhelmed by endlessness
Dimension 5 (identity)	storyteller	writer	
Dimension 6 (epistemology)	empirical		

Bill	JFK Researcher					
Dimension 1 (originating life stage)	young adulthood	middle age				
Dimension 2 (motivations)	solving the mystery	entertainment	fighting against the powers that be	convincing the public	enjoys going on the hunt	
Dimension 3 (methods)	archival research	books				
Dimension 4 (practices and conceptualizations)	reflexive	feels "frisson" when conducting research	passionat e/ takes the research seriously	highly productive		
Dimension 5 (identity)	investigative journalist	analyst	researcher	activist	attorney	writer
Dimension 6 (epistemology)	empirical					

Cyril	JFK Researcher		
Dimension 1 (originating life stage)	adulthood		
Dimension 2 (motivations)	exposing the	fighting against	Convincing the

	truth	the powers that be	public
Dimension 3 (methods)	forensic science experiments		
Dimension 4 (practices and conceptualizations)	narrow definition of research	disconnected from emotion	takes the topic seriously
Dimension 5 (identity)	forensic scientist	doesn't consider himself a researcher	
Dimension 6 (epistemology)	empirical- experiential		

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