Interpersonal Relations and the QAnon Movement

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One's associations with others fulfills certain interpersonal needs; this is the foundational element of Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation theory (FIRO). This inquiry will seek to understand how interpersonal needs might contribute to membership in dangerous and conspiratorial movements, focusing here on the QAnon movement. Relevant background information and scholarship will be provided, and following this an application of the principals of FIRO will attempt to yield insight into the psychological conditions of members of the QAnon movement.

Background

To provide important background information before applying interpersonal relations theory to the QAnon movement: here relevant scholarship on both the QAnon movement and its activities, as well as Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation theory (FIRO) and the potential for use in the online environment will be presented. First an overview will be given of the QAnon movement, and how it will be considered for the purposes of this inquiry, then an overview of FIRO will be provided establishing principles defined in the original work of Schutz (1966) as well as from recent applications to interpersonal relations with the use of technology.

The QAnon movement is an online conspiratorial movement which propagates theories around Donald Trump and a secret coming conflict against a deep state oligarchy of Satanists and pedophiles (which, in its understanding, currently controls the government) based on posts shared on online forums and social media. Kaplan (2021) traces QAnon's rhetorical origins to the satanism scare of the 1980s, where false reports of child abuse by Satanists were sensationalized; these same narratives emerged in 2016 when online conspirators propagated the "Pizzagate" theory, where then-Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton was purposed to be secretly

abusing children in a variety of ways (pp. 918–919). QAnon emerged as a phenomenon when an anonymous online individual (known as "Q") began posting messages on the forum 4chan along with several other anonymous individuals (the "Anons"), claiming that "Q" was a high-ranking military official with secret knowledge of an ongoing conflict in which Donald Trump was waging secret war against the deep state, Hillary Clinton, and other assorted villains (Rothschild, 2021, Ch. 2). Kaplan (2021)'s analysis of the January 6th assault on the Capitol notes that only 16% of participants had demonstrable ties to right wing groups, and the bulk were "[an] assortment of true believers representing a racial, ethnic and religious cross-section of America" (p. 917); but in virtually every case the media diets of participants were "saturated with QAnon and other conspiratorial fantasies" (p. 918). Polling data yields that those with favorable views of QAnon are generally rare in the American political ecosystem (Enders, Uscinski, Klofstad, Wuchty, Seelig, Funchion, Murthi, Premaratne, and Stoler, 2021); however, over time knowledge of QAnon has increased among the general populous, though polling data remains inconsistent (Shanahan, 2021). Enders et al. (2021) found a weak correlation with ideological extremity, but posited that underlying anti-social mental conditions were a more likely cause for QAnon involvement (p. 7). For the purposes of this inquiry, and following the caution of Crenshaw (2000), it will not be assumed that QAnon believers have any exceptional individual psychological malady, as with studies of those who commit political violence, "[i]t is typically not the result of psychopathology or a single personality type [;] … ideological commitment and group solidarity are much more important determinants" (p. 409). This affirms the relevancy of interpersonal dynamics to the QAnon movement; for this, interviews conducted by Rothschild (2021) as well as secondary accounts of interpersonal activity will be analyzed through the lens of interpersonal relations theory.

Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation theory (FIRO), developed by William Schutz in the 1950–60s, is a theory of interpersonal behavior which posits that those who interact with groups do so to fulfill certain interpersonal needs (Schutz, 1966). The three interpersonal needs are inclusion, control, and affection, and are theorized as useful predictors for interpersonal phenomena (Schutz, 1966). The need for inclusion is the need for relations with others, establishing relations and associations, and achieving feelings where one is interested in others and feels that others are interested in oneself (Schutz, 1966, p. 18). The need for control is the need to influence (and be influenced by) others, and fulfillment of this need engenders feelings of respect for competence as one feels respect for others and receives affirmations of others' respect for oneself (Schutz, 1966, pp. 18, 20). The need for affection is the need for relations which create mutual love and respect, being able to love others and receive love from others to oneself, creating the feeling that the self is lovable (Schutz, 1966, p. 20). Each of these needs is manifested in associated behaviors in interpersonal situations (Schutz, 1966). Schutz (1966) defines the interpersonal situation as a situation "involving two or more persons … [who] take account of each other for some purpose, or decision" (p. 14). Important with this definition, and the model as a whole, is its use with regard to online interactions as interpersonal ones, as Schutz (1966) notes that interpersonal relations are not simply face-to-face interaction, and that the presence or absence of such action can be a variable itself (p. 15). These aspects of Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation theory (FIRO) will be important in its application to the QAnon movement and the determination of the underlying psychological condition of its members.

With most of the community-building interactions around QAnon taking place on the internet, the applicability of FIRO to an online space will be crucial to any examination seeking

to understand the interpersonal relations of those entering such a movement. Li and Lee (2013) used the FIRO model in an assessment of interpersonal needs' impact on behavior in Virtual Communities. Their tests took place on online forums, similar to 4Chan forums where QAnon members gather to "decode" messages and interact (Rothschild, 2021). FIRO was selected by Li and Lee (2013) as a method which has applicability beyond a singular relationship type (p. 707). The impacts of inclusion, control, and affection for motivating online activity were found to be significant among participants surveyed on behaviors both to obtain and distribute information online (Li and Lee, 2013, pp. 712–713). Drawing conclusions, it was seen that "[w]hen members present themselves in VCs, they are actually fulfilling the need for inclusion and acceptance by others in a social environment," and that "motivation for seeking different status in VCs is actually consistent with the need for control" (Li and Lee, 2013, p. 716 [internal citation omitted]). Thereby, the applicability of the FIRO model for interpersonal needs to interactions and groups in an online space has previously proved a useful tool for understanding the motivations of online posters. With this relevant background information, the application of FIRO to the condition of the QAnon movement is informed of the complexities of the online medium, as well as the relevancy of the three crucial interpersonal needs.

Application

In this application of FIRO theory to the QAnon movement, qualitative data from interviews with QAnon participants will be used to understand the emotional fulfillments which membership in the movement provides, then aspects of the QAnon movement will be analyzed as potential fulfillments for members' interpersonal needs, with reference to relevant scholarship which details associated behaviors within the movement.

Rothschild (2021) interviewed former members of the QAnon movement, and from these interviews an application of the principles of FIRO might yield insight into the interpersonal needs, and resultant social dynamics of QAnon participants. One interviewee was found to have had traditionally left-leaning political beliefs up until a period of two-year involvement with QAnon conspiracies from 2017 to 2019, this period followed the individual's failure to graduate from college after repeated attempts, as well as receiving a diagnosis of ADHD (pp. 91–93). These dissatisfactions would be negative contributors to an individual's fulfillment of interpersonal needs, primarily inclusion (with the lacking of associations to others and the dissolving of associations from the first individual's educational failures), as well as control (insofar as the need for control extends to *both* the ability to influence others and to be influenced by others) (Schutz, 1966). After associating with QAnon believers in an online community, the first individual described the resulting feeling a sense of importance and esteem, and that this was common amongst QAnon believers who struggle as social outcasts, saying "many see themselves as 'weaponizing' their lack of social skills" (Rothschild, 2021, pp. 92–93). Though statistical data is not available, this qualitative analysis validates at least one component of Schutz' (1966) model, as the association with others fills the deprived need for inclusion and may contribute as a component of identity.

The adoption of identity elements as part of a fulfillment of interpersonal needs is consistent with the analysis of Conner and MacMurray (2021), who posited that the development of the QAnon phenomenon was consistent with the development of other extremists, such as the white power movement, these extremists use "collective and emotionally charged experiences" in the creation of a subculture with the aim of reducing "feelings of loneliness …[and] alienation, which are then weaponized" (p. 5). If an individual was severely deprived in the interpersonal

needs of inclusion, control, and affection, and became united with others through alignment in a countercultural space, the actual beliefs of the QAnon movement would be secondary to the resolution of one's feelings and the avoidance of Schutz' (1966) "social death." Though this is not to say that all adoptions of identity are non-ideological social coincidences, but that as Rothschild (2021) describes, social elements (or more accurately the lack of social commitments) in one's life are potential precursors to conspiracy adoption and involvement.

One unique aspect of the QAnon phenomenon is the development of distinct online "influencers" in the movement, who attain a type of celebrity status among their peers. Rothschild (2021) examines some individuals who gained popularity online, finding several who amassed thousands of followers and were able to translate this into monetary success through fundraising campaigns (pp. 98–99). Schulz (1966) theorized celebrity status as an exercise in inclusion behavior through the acknowledgement of others, with fame being the most extreme inclusion (p. 21). Additionally, potential for inclusion is increased with QAnon being a non-exclusive amalgamation of conspiracy theories, which can be adapted to include beliefs already held in a "big tent" fashion (Conner and MacMurray, 2021, p. 7). With QAnon believers being socially disaffected, the opportunity to gain notoriety amongst an online group presents an avenue to the resolution of the severely depressed inclusion status, and the non-exclusive nature presents ample opportunity for the fulfillment of one's inclusion need.

Another aspect of QAnon which is unique, and provides an example of an avenue for the fulfillment of an interpersonal need, is the activity of "decoding." Because QAnon revolves around a number of messages (called "Q drops") posted anonymously by "Q," the interpretation (or "decoding") of these messages is a central activity for the group (Rothschild, 2021, pp. 8–9). Group tasks, as Schutz (1966) notes, are often key avenues for the exhibiting of control behavior;

intellectual superiority or responsibility may be demonstrated and through this the control need fulfilled (p. 23). When one engages in a decoding activity, they are within a group of others with which they associate (meaning the inclusion condition is met) and then participate in a collaboration where there ideas may influence others (fulfilling the condition for satisfactory control interactions) and so one could be affirmed that they are responsible or important through this control behavior. The opposite side of control behavior (as the interpersonal need extends both to influence others and be influenced by others) would be the adoption of others' understandings or interpretations into one's personal beliefs, so that the need to be influenced is also fulfilled through the interactions. Rothschild (2021) notes that of the many "Anons" who became popular through their participation in "decoding," there was not always universal agreement (perhaps the result of ongoing predictions of a coming resolution which did not arise) and so elements of posturing and disagreement were present; Hyzen and Van den Bulck (2021) note the elements of ideological entrepreneurship in the differentiation, whereby conspirators must maintain relevancy for success (pp. 182–183). These behaviors evidence an environment of competition for control, as such the fulfillment of the interpersonal need is made possible through the exercise of the task, as Li and Lee (2013) found that activity on online forums (where Q decoding takes place) is influenced by posters' interpersonal needs, with behavior to give information to others influenced by control needs as well as the others (p. 712). Though such activities of online posting are, in part, required for the dissemination of information, they are also task behaviors through which group members are able to fulfill the interpersonal need for control via the influence of other members.

The interpersonal need for affection is one which Schutz (1966) characterizes as dyadic in nature, providing a fulfillment through the sense of intimacy one attains from another and the

affirmation that one is a lovable person (p. 20). This characterization makes membership in the QAnon movement an unlikely route to the fulfillment of one's interpersonal need for affection, however the cycle of emphases provided by Schutz (1966) might provide an avenue for better understanding the process of group membership with relation to affection. As is described in the postulate of group development, the beginning stages of being involved with a group would primarily emphasize inclusion as the relation is formed, then the conduct of tasks with the group would emphasize control, following this the close relations of affection would be emphasized as closer relationships are formed between individuals (Schutz, 1966, pp. 169–171). Though Li and Lee (2013) applied FIRO principals and found relevancy for each in the online forum environment, the facets of social media for a large movement where one is interacting with many may prolong the cycle of the inclusion phase (as oftentimes one will inevitably not be online at the same time as many others), and the control phase may be expanded through completion of tasks with a group of large collaborators. FIRO does not demarcate breaks between each emphasized state, and each need is present in each state, but the online environment may be more conducive to the inclusion and control elements.

Discussion and Further Research

In the examination of QAnon we see the continued relevance of interpersonal needs as laid out in FIRO. Though the online environment presents challenges for interpersonal examinations, the principal needs of inclusion, control, and affection may be seen in the antecedent conditions and behaviors of group members. These conditions may primarily emphasize inclusion and control as needs fulfilled through the group's activities, but may also hold potential for the the dyadic affection may also be attained.

Limitations on this research would be the scarcity of resources and inconsistency of statistical and polling data (as identified by Enders et al., 2021; and Shanahan, 2021). Though what qualitative data from interviews provided by Rothschild (2021) was useful, it was scarce and part of a larger inquiry which had roots which were journalistic rather than psychological in nature. An accurate characterization of QAnon believers, as a group which has been noted by Kaplan (2021) as non-monolithic, is essential for any inquiry as to the motivating factors and underlying psychology of its members. From the available resources, and with the application of FIRO, an inquiry here was conducted into the relationship between interpersonal needs and membership in the QAnon movement as a route to interpersonal fulfillment, most relevantly in the needs for inclusion and control. The accuracy of such characterization currently provided by those accounts available will be the determiner of if the conditions identified are the most common. Though, with what analysis has been done of qualitative data, the present trend of disaffection from society leading to a resultant anxiety state and search for interpersonal fulfilment appears logical within the frame proscribed by FIRO principals. This inquiry should not be taken as to say that the sometimes violent actions of conspiracy believers (as detailed in multiple instances in Rothschild, 2021) are in anyway lessened by the knowledge of the underlying anxieties which may have contributed to an individual's group membership from interpersonal condition, but merely that a greater understanding of these conditions is necessary and is better illuminated with the use of interpersonal relations theory.

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