

PART I

Introduction to QAnon

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CHAPTER I

The “Who, What, and Why” of QAnon

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“Shall we play the game again?”

This cryptic quote was posted on 8kun, an anonymous message board, on June 24, 2022 (Thompson, 2022). The poster is a person (or persons) known only as “Q,” the leader of a group called QAnon (short for Q Anonymous). The group is largely online, gathering virtually on chat boards and social media. The group discusses the various clues (called “Q-drops”) posted by Q and other leaders (see Chapter 3) and tries to decipher their meaning. Some followers are more invested, however, gathering at conventions and rallies in person. The group has prompted promotional products, including a video called “Great Awakening” and a book *Calm Before the Storm* (see Chapters 2 and 12). Although QAnon started in the USA, the group’s influence is now international (see Chapters 8 and 17), and about 20 percent of Americans believe the core beliefs of QAnon (PRRI, 2021).

In order to understand this phenomenon, it is important to start at the beginning. In 2017, a message board poster calling themselves “Q Clearance Patriot” (later given the nickname “Q”) posted on the website 4chan. The poster initially posted “Open your eyes . . . Many in our govt worship Satan” (Kirkpatrick, 2022), and they went on to predict that Hillary Clinton would be arrested on October 30, 2017. Although this prediction did not come true, the post garnered the attention of many people, and some key players actively promoted the messages (Beverley, 2020). While there is much speculation, no one knows for sure who Q is. Followers believe they are a high-ranking government official who is part of a plan to punish perceived wrongdoers. Another leading theory is that Q has been multiple people. Linguistic analysis suggests that Q’s posts were originally written by Paul Ferber, one of the first of Q’s followers, but then later were written by Ron Watkins, who operated one of the chat boards Q often used (Kirkpatrick, 2022). Both men have denied being Q,

but linguistic experts say that their prose and language patterns suggest that they were the authors of Q's posts (Kirkpatrick, 2022).

QAnon leaders have used many recruitment tactics, including hashtag hijacking, in which QAnon talking points and/or disinformation are inserted into the conversation of a trending hashtag (e.g. #Election2020; see Chapters 8 and 12). QAnon nonbelievers unknowingly became exposed to QAnon messages and some eventually became believers. The movement grew rapidly, with a possible increase in growth occurring in 2020 (see Chapters 5 and 8, but see Chapter 9 for a counterpoint). However, Q fell silent after President Trump's 2020 election defeat. The mysterious message above, posted on June 24, 2022, could signal a renewed interest in the group that is the subject of this book.

As it grew and evolved to include broader conspiracies, QAnon attracted the attention of the public, social media, the FBI, and lawmakers (see Chapters 4 and 8). QAnon has some characteristics of conspiracy groups, quasi-religious groups, social movements, and organizations that are sometimes called "cults." While QAnon has some traits that are similar to aspects of all of these groups, it focuses on conspiracies; therefore, this book will label it as a conspiracy group. This introductory chapter begins by briefly discussing the beliefs, leadership, and history of the group. The chapter then discusses the quantity and diversity of QAnon followers, introducing some of the reasons people are attracted to QAnon. The chapter moves on to discuss similarities and differences among QAnon and other conspiracy groups. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of the themes in each part of this book.

The overall purpose of this book is to use social science theories to answer questions regarding QAnon and inspire a future generation of researchers to study this new and novel group that could have an influence on the USA's future. This book focuses specifically on the *social science* of QAnon. Psychosocial factors are those at the intersection of the individual person and the social environment. Together, psychology and society shape every aspect of life, from our day-to-day behavior to our life-altering choices. The social situation is an input into these choices and behaviors, and it is an output as a result. The QAnon phenomenon is no exception, as followers are influenced by society and their group to act and believe in certain ways – and society is changed as a result. This book will investigate the psychosocial factors at play in the phenomenon that is QAnon.

The scientific research *specifically* on QAnon is scarce. While there are books dedicated to conspiracy theories and new religious movements, this book is the first that I know of that applies social science theories to explain

QAnon specifically (for more on QAnon in general, see Beverley, 2020). As such, the book takes the approach of applying existing theories to QAnon-related phenomena rather than rehashing research that has already been published. Thus, every chapter presents a unique perspective on this novel topic that is emerging as yet another controversy of the 2020s.

What Is QAnon?

QAnon is, at the most basic level, a conspiracy theory. But it is also part religion, part political group, and part social movement. No matter how it is labeled, it is a moneymaker for many individual people and groups. Chapters 2, 16, and 17 discuss many of QAnon’s differences from and similarities to other organizations such as the company NXIVM, social movements, various new religious movements, terrorist groups, and other conspiracy groups. Chapters 2 and 14 compare QAnon to alternate-reality or role-playing games.

QAnon shares many characteristics with religious groups, yet it lacks other characteristics, leading authors to call QAnon “quasi-religious” or a “hyper-real religion” (Franks et al., 2013; see also Chapters 16 and 17 of this volume). Q often quotes the Bible and infers that God supports their efforts (see Chapters 16 and 17 for more on the religious characteristics of QAnon). No one is born into QAnon, as are some members of religious minority groups.

QAnon also has similarities to and differences from *nonreligious* groups. QAnon does not typically keep incriminating information about its members (as did the company NXIVM) to prevent them from leaving the group. Indeed, there is not even a “membership roster.” QAnon is not as violent as some terrorist groups, but it does have a general “mission.” And QAnon is much more of a participatory group than most conspiracy groups in which followers are more consumers than producers or replicators of the conspiracy.

Finally, like many other groups, QAnon has globalized, becoming part of the cultures of many countries (especially in Europe), and it has the potential to spread worldwide. Internationally, the conspiracies vary somewhat, but they have similar themes (e.g. immigration, COVID-19-related economic downturn, or restrictions to “personal liberties”; see Chapter 8). Some QAnon conspiracies implicate international heads of state such as Angela Merkel and Boris Johnson; some support Trump, including calling on Trump to “Make Germany Great Again” (see also Chapters 8 and 17 for more on the spread of QAnon internationally). Thus, QAnon has

many similarities to and differences from various types of groups. The section below called “What Is QAnon” details some of the unique characteristics of QAnon as a conspiracy group.

The difficulty of categorizing QAnon stems, in part, from the diversity of its beliefs. QAnon’s basic beliefs are summarized throughout this book (in greatest detail in Chapters 8 and 9). In general, QAnon followers believe a host of conspiracies that generally propose that former President Trump is in the process of bringing down a cabal of satanic pedophiles and cannibals, who are part of the “Deep State” that runs a sex-trafficking ring and controls the government. The cabal allegedly consists mainly of Democrats, entertainers, and religious figures. These alleged wrongdoers are Satan-worshippers who harvest adrenochrome from children by sacrificing them. They predict that there will be a “Great Awakening,” when their prophecies will come true and the evildoers will be exposed and punished.

The group has had a diverse range of alleged effects on individual people, families, and society (see Chapters 2, 5, and 17). For example, some followers have committed crimes in the name of QAnon; some have lost touch with family members by allowing QAnon to consume their lives; some have become consumed by fear, paranoia, and even violence. Yet many – likely most – will continue to function normally or even benefit from the social interactions and sense of belonging that they receive from following QAnon. One of QAnon’s mottos, “Where We Go One, We Go All,” signifies the importance of belonging and togetherness. Chapters 8 and 11 further discuss these effects related to the need to belong.

Whether QAnon is a conspiracy group, a religion, or something else, it is almost certainly a moneymaker for many people. For instance, there are numerous books on QAnon (e.g. how to interpret Q’s messages and how to prepare for the “Great Awakening”). Some of these books have been very popular, with a book called *QAnon: An Invitation to the Great Awakening* once ranking at number 56 of all books, number 9 of all books about politics, and number 1 of all books about censorship on Amazon (Collins, 2019). QAnon supporters can buy shirts, hats, flags, car stickers, baby clothes, and any number of other goods. Conventions are also potential moneymakers, with attendees spending money to attend and buy merchandise. Additionally, YouTube “content creators” provide messages (e.g. tutorials regarding QAnon’s beliefs and interpretations of Q’s messages). Large numbers of viewers help these creators generate substantial amounts of money (see Chapter 12).

In sum, QAnon is a novel social entity that emerged in 2017 and – although primarily a US phenomenon – has spread internationally. The authors of this book all provide glimpses into the identity of QAnon as a whole and its individual followers.

Who Believes in QAnon?

QAnon has a broad following, with some who are *complete* believers, but many who believe only a subset of QAnon conspiracies (much like some religious followers do not believe all of their religion’s teachings). Chapter 2 proposes a typological continuum that categorizes QAnon believers into “fence-sitters,” “true believers,” “activists,” and “apostates.”

It is difficult to calculate how many followers QAnon has, considering that there is no membership list. Even so, QAnon is remarkable because its size is likely unprecedented: Some estimates of its unofficial following range into the hundreds of thousands – perhaps even over a million, judging from social media group membership. But just because someone follows a QAnon social media page or believes some of the QAnon conspiracies does not mean that they are a “member.” Chapter 9 notes that only 5–8 percent of Americans supported QAnon as of 2019–2020 (when that chapter was written). In a 2021 poll, 20 percent of Americans agreed with one of the major prophecies of QAnon: “There is a storm coming soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders.” And 15 percent agreed with the major holding of QAnon that “the government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation” (PRRI, 2021).

Support is not uniform across all Americans, however. A study found that 45 percent of self-identifying Republicans had favorable attitudes toward QAnon (The Economist/YouGov, 2021) and 27 percent of white evangelicals thought that the statement “Donald Trump has been secretly fighting a group of child sex traffickers that include prominent Democrats and Hollywood elites” was either “mostly” or “completely” accurate (Cox, 2021). These percentages are higher than those for all other political or religious groups. Chapter 8 further details evidence of the size of QAnon.

While not all of the people in the PRRI survey likely would identify as QAnon followers, this poll indicates that a nontrivial number of people agree with these QAnon-related statements. Thus, the beliefs of QAnon are fairly widespread. This begs the question answered in the next section: Why?

Why Do People Follow QAnon?

There are many reasons why people are attracted to QAnon. For instance, QAnon presents an exciting mystery, full of clues and puzzles (called Q-drops) left by other followers or an anonymous leader (named Q) believed to be a high-ranking political leader. As such, following QAnon is similar to playing an ever-changing, massive multiplayer video game (see Chapters 2 and 14). Further, followers participate in real time and can easily access other followers if they have access to the internet and the ability to read, post, and repost social media messages. These aspects might attract some followers to QAnon.

Although some people might jump to the conclusion that QAnon followers are somehow abnormal, there is no evidence that they, as a group, are delusional or have serious mental illness (see Chapter 2), nor are they “brainwashed” (see Chapter 7). Chapter 9, however, suggests that QAnon support is driven by antiestablishment sentiments and antisocial personality traits.

Additionally, there are numerous psychological and sociological explanations detailing the types of people might become QAnon followers. For instance, Chapter 2 suggests that a person’s need for certainty, control, and closure – as well as symptoms associated with depression, anxiety, or substance abuse – could encourage someone to follow QAnon. Further, people who believe that society’s values are being threatened (called “system identity threat”) are more likely to believe in conspiracies (see Chapter 8), and these beliefs help meet the person’s existential, epistemic, and social needs. The role of emotion in QAnon support is discussed in Chapter 6. Affect – and affective polarization – can prompt conspiratorial beliefs, spread of misinformation, and violent behavior.

Further, Chapter 4 discusses how membership could be related to cognitive *processes* (e.g. delusional ideation, teleological thinking, cognitive closure), *biases* (e.g. groupthink, confirmation bias, jumping to conclusions bias), and *traits* (e.g. narcissism, Machiavellianism, political affiliation). Similarly, Chapter 7 discusses how QAnon members use techniques such as “foot in the door” to recruit new members, and Chapter 2 provides anecdotal evidence for how members go “down the rabbit hole” and end up entrenched in QAnon.

Data suggest that QAnon has become normalized within society (Pierre, 2020). Indeed, research has indicated that labeling something a “conspiracy” does not reduce people’s belief in the idea, indicating perhaps that the media’s romanticized portrayal of conspiracies has led the term

“conspiracy” to lose its stigma (Wood, 2016). With this negative connotation removed, people are free to believe in QAnon and reap the benefits of belonging to its community (see Chapter 11).

The events of 2020 could have contributed to the attractiveness of QAnon (see Chapters 2, 5, and 8, but see Chapter 9 for another perspective). These include Donald Trump’s presidency, COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and other social events. Chapter 5 posits that parasite stress theory, moral foundations theory, and terror management theory can partially explain the shift toward conservative values that contributed to QAnon’s popularity. The events of 2020 could have increased support for conspiracy theories, and this increased support allowed QAnon followers to justify the group’s harmful actions (e.g. spreading false COVID-19 information or committing violence; see also Chapter 15 for more on the harms of disinformation) as predicted by moral disengagement theory (see also Chapter 8).

With so many psychosocial influences encouraging support for QAnon, it is little surprise that the group has taken hold within a nontrivial proportion of the population. For the same reasons, it is also difficult to counter the group’s messages or dissuade followers to abandon their beliefs in the conspiracy. Chapter 15 discusses the techniques of debunking and “prebunking” – both designed to prevent the spread of disinformation.

In sum, there are numerous reasons why people believe in QAnon. Many of these reasons are not unique to QAnon. So is it “just another conspiracy theory”? As discussed in the next section, the answer is both “yes” and “no.”

Is QAnon “Just Another Conspiracy Theory”?

QAnon is the latest in a series of conspiracy narratives that have arisen throughout American history (see Chapter 10) and are grounded in folklore (see Chapter 14). Chapter 10 describes the witchcraft narrative in 1692 Salem and the 1980s satanic cult narrative. It is thus worth exploring whether QAnon is “just another conspiracy theory.”

Many chapters in this book explore possible ways in which QAnon is similar to and different from other such groups that are primarily religious, political, or social. For example, QAnon has a clear leader and primary (virtual) meeting places, which are more common traits of quasi-religious groups than of most conspiracy groups. QAnon’s conspiracies are many, unlike some singular-belief conspiracy groups (e.g. a group that believes that the Earth is flat). QAnon’s conspiracies are extraordinary for their

breadth and extremity, as described in Chapter 10. These conspiracies include those about the 2020 presidential election, the faked death (and predicted reappearance) of John F. Kennedy, Jr., sex trafficking, COVID-19, and climate change – just to name a few. Further, QAnon is unique because it is continually adapting and incorporating new conspiracies. It also aligns itself with other lifestyle and conspiracy groups in order to attract more members (see Chapter 17).

QAnon is also unique because of the attention it gets from the media, the marketplace, and political leaders. Social media took monumental steps to prevent QAnon groups from promoting false claims (see Chapters 12–14 for more on social media and QAnon). For instance, Facebook banned QAnon on October 6, 2020, because of its belief that QAnon was spreading disinformation (see also Chapters 12, 13, and 17). Although QAnon books were some of its top sellers (Collins, 2019), Amazon stopped selling any QAnon-related material (e.g. books, clothing) in early 2021 after the January 6 insurrection in Washington, DC (Pena, 2021).

Additionally, QAnon is not a typical conspiracy group because of the attention it is getting from high-level leaders. President Trump has called QAnon followers “people who love our country” and has supported congressional candidates who support QAnon. In all, over a dozen congressional candidates on the 2020 ticket were QAnon followers to varying degrees (see Chapter 5 for more on QAnon and political candidates and Chapter 9 for more on QAnon and politics).

Additionally, QAnon is a unique conspiracy group because of the concern it has raised about possible violence (see Chapters 5 and 9) and the harms associated with disinformation (see Chapter 15). A number of QAnon followers have committed crimes in the name of QAnon. Although QAnon itself does not directly call for violence, members sometimes take it upon themselves to act. Other people have spread harmful disinformation, including a conspiracy claiming that 5G communication towers were to blame for COVID-19 – or even that COVID-19 does not exist (see Chapters 13 and 15). A precursor event to QAnon, called Pizzagate, occurred during the 2016 election year. Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton’s leaked emails allegedly contained coded messages about a pizza restaurant in Washington, DC that was allegedly operating a satanic child sex-trafficking ring in its basement. In December 2016, a North Carolina man traveled to the restaurant in Washington, DC to “self-investigate” the claims, bringing with him an assault rifle. He fired three shots in the restaurant, including into a door he believed to lead to the basement. The pizza restaurant did not, in fact, have