

Understanding the Freemasons:

A Qualitative Analysis

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Introduction

A common interpretation of the Freemasons is that they are a secret society. However, can a society be a secret if everyone not only knows they exist, but also discusses their behavior? They may more accurately be dubbed a society with secrets. The idea of the Freemasons has been popularized through various mediums, such as the movie *National Treasure* (2004). This popularization has pushed the idea of a brotherhood full of secret handshakes, passwords, and clues left throughout history to the front of many minds. The group is no longer solely the focus of conspiracy theorists and historians. Media portrays the Freemasons and their affiliated groups as being clandestine, powerful, and altogether mysterious. From works of fiction such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* to news articles that describe the Freemasons as a group with "grandiose rituals [that] have played a secretive, mysterious role in American life" (NY Times, Oct 4 2006), the fraternal group is portrayed as an enigma that has yet to be unraveled. Given the exclusive and secretive nature of the group, an abundance of conspiracy theories have circled the group's activities and members, leading to confusion and in some cases fear by those who are not members. A sample of the various conspiracies exhibits all manner of strange activities, including faking the Apollo moon landing, sinking the Titanic, and starting both the French and Russian Revolutions (Masonic Network, 2009).

Despite the continuous flurry of accusations aimed at the Freemasons, the group is able to flourish. There is a continuous flood of information being given to non-members, none of which can be corroborated by the Freemasons as they are bound by secrecy. The information available may be true, but not knowing for sure is yet another method used by the Freemasons to maintain the secret nature of the group, and create a power imbalance between the organization and society. This secrecy perpetuates the cycle of unenlightened citizens forming their own conclusions about the group's activities, which in turn creates further conspiracy theories which cannot be confirmed as true or false, resulting in the group holding more power over general society. The research question related to this situation is two-fold: what information is available to non-members and how accurate is it?

Background

As a group, the Freemasons write their own rules, and in doing so create a society in which ordinary citizens are powerless. Non-members have discussed the actions of the Freemasons, both alleged and truthful, for generations. The secrecy that enshrouds the group means that any information non-members receive cannot be verified, thus ensuring that the Freemasons remain in power. As C. Wright Mills (1956) says, "as the means of information and of power are centralized, some men come to occupy positions in American society from which they can look down upon, so to speak, and by their decisions mightily affect, the everyday worlds of ordinary men and women" (p. 229). In terms of the Freemasons, the more information they disseminate and do not confirm the more power they have and are able to participate in actions that the men and women in the everyday world will discuss.

The covert nature of the Freemasons is not only problematic for society in general; it has also created a unique situation for researchers. As peer-reviewed articles are intended to be based on information gathered through a means that is scientific in either a quantitative or qualitative method, it is assumed that the findings presented in them are truthful. A conundrum exists when the subject matter is classified, and extremely difficult to verify. As such, very few academic articles have presented any findings that may be considered 'truthful' and 'accurate' as they do not contain any information gleaned from a direct source, and rather rely on interpretations of ancient documents and the examination of signs and symbols which may or may not have the meanings attributed to them by the non-members studying them. In order to study the group, two main questions must be answered: how did they get started, and what do they do?

Various accounts of the origins of the Freemasons have been presented in studies of the group. Stevenson (2011), attempts to answer this question in an article describing Freemasonry in Scotland, starting in the early 1600s. Given this article is based on previous works by this author and various books published by others, there is some question as to whether the information presented is in fact accurate. However, given the limited number of academic articles that may even be considered as truthful, this article is used to frame one of the more likely explanations as to the origins of the Freemasons. Stevenson (2011) suggests that the first Freemason lodges were composed entirely of stonemasons, and over time allowed outsiders into the group because it was beneficial to the group to have gentry affiliated with the craftsmen (p. 282-283). Part of this reasoning was that the rich men were willing to pay higher fees to the lodge, and also to satisfy their curiosity about the lodge (p. 283). Eventually, recruiting the rich led to strain amongst the members, and the tradesmen were unable to afford the more expensive dues of the rich (p. 285). When the Grand Lodges of London spread to Scotland, the local stonemason lodges felt increased pressure to admit outsiders, and their popularity grew by way of what Stevenson refers to as "branding" (p. 284). Stevenson (2011) also notes that the legislation enacted in 1799 in England outlawing secret oaths did not disband the Freemasons, as groups which were already established were exempt (p. 289). Stevenson (2011) concludes by noting that over time, the Freemasons have become more secretive, and the reasons for this change are unknown (p. 295).

Ridley (2008) suggests a similar explanation for the origins of the Freemasons. Ridley proposes that the Freemasons began as stoneworkers, building structures such as the London Bridge and numerous cathedrals across England (p. 4). However, between 1550 and 1700 the group changed. Ridley (2008) notes that, the group moved from a collection of stonemason who all accepted the Catholic Church to a group of men who accepted all religions (p. 17). In the 1500s it was uncommon for influential men to join the group; however, by the 1600s more Scottish gentlemen were participating in the Freemasons (Ridley, 2008, p. 230).

This expansion of the group to include assorted religious followers and men of varying socio-economic statuses is contradictory to the reputation the Freemasons have of being secretive and exclusive; however, without some extension of the criteria for membership the group would not have survived. For current research, understanding the history and the origins of the group is crucial to being able to gain insight into how they have grown into the group they are today.

The other main question surrounding the Freemasons is about what the group does. Of the many possible explanations available, one of the more thorough interpretations comes from Morrison in an examination of Masonic drinking songs from the late 1700s in Vienna. The songs used were published by the lodge, and therefore contain an element of authenticity that other sources do not have. The activities of the Freemasons are most succinctly summarized in the phrase, "in their meetings, the men joyously embraced one another, got drunk, and celebrated brotherhood through group singing" (Morrison, 2012, p. 49). These celebrations reinforced the gender norms and created a community in which the men could "explore and glorify behaviors the rest of society typically discouraged" (p. 50). Morrison (2012) notes that publishing the lyrics to their songs allowed the Masons to advertise, and yet at the same time restrict membership and preaching the equality of all involved (p. 53). Throughout the article, there are references to the ways in which the Freemasons thought of women. The theme of women as important to daily life and yet not important enough to participate is evident in examples such as the belief that women should be thankful to be excluded (p. 54) and lyrics that "[identify] women as emotional and demanding, though with useful biological functions" (p. 58). Altogether, Morrison presents a picture of the Freemasons as bawdy group of men who come together to engage in activities that general society viewed as inappropriate.

Attempts to understand the activities of the Freemasons often lead to questions regarding the group's affiliations with religion. Fozdar (2011) purports that the concept of the Freemasons being a religion is due to the varying definitions of religion presented by scholars, and to how "masons and their opponents have viewed Freemasonry" (p. 496). The confusion may arise from contradictions presented by the Freemasons. Fozdar (2011) notes that the official standpoint of the Freemasons is that the group is not a religion; however, in speeches and presentations members of the group have referred to it as a religion (p. 496-497). This may be a conscious attempt on the part of the Freemasons to keep their true activities secret, or it may be a difference in defining the term 'religion.' As far as research into the current activities of the group is concerned, there is an opportunity to learn a great deal more about whether the misogynistic attitude has continued into today's lodge meetings, and to discover if the avant-garde attitudes of the ancient Freemasons have evolved into beliefs that today would certainly be considered sexist. As well, in the event that any of the conspiracies surrounding the group are true, there

would be a tremendous impact on both governments and the future of any other groups attempting to keep their activities a secret.

Methods

This study uses two methods in order to determine how accurate the information available to non-members about the Freemasons is: a one-on-one, semi-structured, face-to-face interview with a member of the Freemasons and a content analysis of a documentary about the Freemasons. The themes found in each of these methods are then compared and contrasted in order to analyze how much information is presented as accurate is actually false, and what misconceptions non-members may have about the group. The interview was conducted prior to the researcher viewing the documentary in order to prevent any themes that may be apparent in the film from biasing the types of questions asked by the researcher. After watching the documentary, a second interview was conducted with the same participant in order to gather further information on topics presented in the documentary.

Convenience sampling was used to find the participant. This type of sampling was chosen due to the time limit of the study as well as the nature of the subject matter. Given the secrecy of the group, convenience sampling is the most logical choice to find a member of the group available to the researcher.

The documentary, used for content analysis, was chosen using a mix of convenience sampling and simple random sampling. Convenience sampling was chosen given the time constraints of the research and the resources available to the researcher. The documentary had to be one that could be accessed quickly and easily be viewed multiple times. In order to ensure that the documentary chosen covered not only myths about the Freemasons, but also their history and any barriers to entry, a list of all documentaries about the Freemasons that would be accessible by the researcher was compiled using a Google search, and the descriptions of each documentary were reviewed for the key terms 'history,' 'initiation,' 'membership,' 'myths,' 'misconceptions,' and 'religion.' This narrowed the results to those that contained all or nearly all of the key words, and the documentary was chosen using simple random sampling from the remaining pool of choices.

The medium of a documentary was chosen as opposed to a film or television show, because documentaries purport to be factual, which is a necessary quality, given the research question focuses on what information available to non-members is accurate and true. A film or television production could be based on information the creators believe to be true; however, the potential for creative license in the production of the film or show negates any potential truth in these forms of media. There are also a number of books written about the Freemasons, some of which are classified as non-fiction. The majority of books about the Freemasons focus on one part of the group as opposed to the entire

culture, and the vast majority of the written works regarding the Freemasons are categorized as fiction and literature by major retailers. This tendency to focus on a small portion of the group combined with the probability that the book would be considered a fictional work makes books about the Freemasons an unreliable source for finding truths about the group.

The interview was conducted in the researcher's home, due to the fact that the researcher and the subject have a pre-existing relationship. A question guideline was used throughout the interview. In order to protect the participant, the researcher did not record his name, age, contact information, or the name of his employer. As the group is fraternal, it is impossible to conceal the gender of the participant. Any identifying information that was provided in the interview was removed from the transcript. As well, the participant was not asked to provide the names of any other members of the group, or to provide any information that could be used to identify a member. The interview began with an overview of what the questions would be about, including an outline of the main sections and the expected length of the interview. The participant was reminded that the interview will be audio-recorded in order to aid in transcription, which was also included in the consent form. As well, the participant was reminded that he may withdraw from the interview at any time without penalty, and may also choose not to answer any questions. No compensation or remuneration of any kind was provided in return for participation in the study.

The questions in the interview focused on the topic of what it is like to be a Freemason in order to provide an understanding of how to become a member, who is in the group, how the group started, and what the group does. The first section of questions centered on how to become a member, and included questions aimed at determining motives for joining, and requirements and benefits of membership. The second section focused on the attributes of the members, including questions regarding the age range of membership, the gender ratio, and the types of professions of the members. The third section was about the history of the group, and questions covered topics such as when and where the group started. Finally, the last section was about what the group does together. This section was comprised of questions such as when and where the group meets and what they do in their meetings. In this section as well, there were some questions regarding what kinds of misconceptions there are about the group. These kinds of questions focused on information the participant had heard before becoming a member that he now knows not to be true and anything he would like to clarify about the group. To finish the interview, the participant was given the opportunity to ask any questions about the interview or the research.

Following the first interview and viewing the documentary, a follow-up interview was conducted in order to gather further data regarding concepts that appeared in the documentary. The questions for the follow-up interview were derived from information presented in the documentary on topics that were

either not covered in the first interview, or that were included but were not covered in enough detail. Many of the questions in the follow-up interview ask about specific conspiracy theories, as that is the topic of the documentary. As the consent form for the initial interview did not include any information pertaining to a follow-up interview, verbal consent was obtained from the participant prior to the start of the second interview. Once the interviews were complete, the audio files were transcribed by the researcher. These transcripts were coded for themes. The same coding process was used on the researcher's notes from the documentary. The documentary was viewed multiple times to allow the researcher to add to any notes taken during previous viewings. Once each item had been coded, the results were compared to identify themes that occurred in both the interviews and the documentary. Themes that appeared in one method but not the other were also noted. These themes were then analyzed in order to attain understanding of the group, and of what information non-members may have that is inaccurate.

Results

When coding the data, the interviews and the documentary were analyzed independently prior to being compared. In the analysis of the documentary, the recurring theme was regarding the potential conspiracy theories surrounding the Freemasons throughout history. As the documentary is described as focusing on conspiracy theories, this pattern cannot be considered a true theme, and instead will be considered as information to be verified (or not) by the questions in the follow up interview. The following section discusses the themes present in only the interviews, themes present in the interviews and the documentary, and the information provided in the documentary that was either confirmed or denied by the member in the follow-up interview as a measure of the accuracy of the data from the documentary.

The Interviews

When conducting the interviews, two themes became immediately apparent. The member interviewed did not make any negative comments about the group, and the descriptions given about what it is like to be a Freemason and what the group does were reminiscent of being read a brochure. Throughout the initial interview, the member made comments such as "everybody is welcome," "each one of [the members] is ready at the drop of a hat to help you," and that the members are "jovial." No negative adjectives or descriptors were used. As well, when describing the actions of the group the participant used phrases such as "they take a good man and make him better" and "there is the collection plate...that goes straight down to the Y [YMCA], for the homeless." All negative actions on the part of the group were denied, such as the sinking of the Titanic, faking the Apollo moon landing, and that the square and compass symbol is

"nothing sinister." This pattern is related to the second theme apparent in the interviews, in that when conducting the initial interview the interviewer noticed the feeling of being read a brochure about the group when asking about what the group does. This sensation may have arisen from the lack of negative comments, providing the impression of an attempt on the participant's behalf to sell the merit of the Freemasons, and to dispel the notion that the group is involved in anything unfavorable. Negative comments were only found in the documentary, which contains information provided from the perspective of a non-member. This raises more questions than it answers; however, are the responses an honest interpretation of a group in which the participant has never had one negative experience, or are they what the secretive group considers an acceptable level of truthfulness? If the participant is only providing answers that are approved by the organization, can any information truly be considered accurate, or is it simply a furtherance of the available propaganda? Any answers given by the participant that have undergone a censoring process by a group dedicated to maintaining secrecy cannot be relied upon to be truthful, thus skewing any results that may be obtained from analyzing the transcripts. This possibility will be kept in mind while evaluating the prominent themes found in the interviews and the documentary, and in assessing the information provided regarding the numerous conspiracy theories.

The Interviews and the Documentary

A number of themes were found when analyzing the interviews and the documentary together. A few themes that were noticed in the interviews were the concepts of brotherhood, education about the history of the Freemasons, and the structure of the organization. Although these themes were noticeable, they were not the most prevalent. Among the themes that appeared the most are the concept of secrecy, the prevalence of symbols and rituals, and the role of religion.

Secrecy

This theme was the most obvious and the least surprising to find. Throughout both the initial interview and the follow-up interview the participant was unable to provide answers to some of the questions. In some cases the response was "I can't tell you that," "I can't really go into it," or "that's about all I can say" giving a clear indication that the reputation for secrecy among the Freemasons is very accurate. The vast majority of questions to which the participant would not provide an answer were direct questions about what the group does, what happens at meetings, and what certain symbols mean indicating that these are topics which the Freemasons are instructed not to discuss with non-members.

This idea is further supported in the follow-up interview. Below is an excerpt from the follow-up interview, in which the participant demonstrates that he is not allowed to speak about the topic the researcher raised regarding the story of

Hiram Abiff, whom the participant confirmed was the lead architect building King Solomon's temple, and had tried to protect a secret of the Freemasons:

Interviewer: Okay and you said that he was trying to protect the secret of the third degree. Was that a password that he was trying to protect?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Is that password MAHABONE?

Participant: No.

Interviewer: If it was would you be allowed to say so?

Participant: No.

A similar response was given in the initial interview when the participant mentioned he did not hold any faith in the conspiracy theories. When asked if he would be allowed to say if they were true, he replied "no."

In one case, the response by the participant was "I can't really go into details with you as an interviewer" suggesting that the keeping of secrets is extended past the members as far as certain others—excluding interviewers, and therefore members of the media attempting to learn about the organization—but not so far as the general public. This also indicates that some people who are not members are expected to understand that although they are not told everything, what they are told is meant to stay secret. The element of secrecy was also present in the documentary with the narrator making comments such as, "Freemasons are not open about what they do," "lodges are closed to outsiders," "secret handshakes are used to identify other members," and that they are a group "veiled in allegory." Altogether, secrecy is present in understanding how the group started, what they do, and what their symbols and rituals mean.

Symbols and Rituals

Various symbols and rituals are discussed in the interviews and the documentary, including the letter "G" and the square and compass. The documentary suggests that the Freemasons use the letter "G" as a symbol for God, goodness, and geometry. When asked about this symbol, the participant responded that it symbolizes God, and that this is the only interpretation used. In regards to the square and compass, all the participant would say is that "it all goes towards parts of your second and first degrees." The documentary presents the square and compass with the letter "G" in the middle as meaning one should square his actions by the square of virtue, and remember that God is in the center of life. In the initial interview the participant mentioned an apron as a symbol of a "working tool of craftsmen." These aprons are adorned with jewels at the different degrees, and each jewel tells the other members the status of the wearer. These symbols are integral to the teachings of Freemasonry in that the meanings of many of the symbols are kept secret and revealed only to members.

Rituals were discussed in both the interviews and in the documentary. The documentary notes the re-enactment of the murder of Hiram Abiff as one of the rituals performed by the Freemasons as a way of learning about the history of the group. When asked about the ritual, the participant confirmed that in one ritual they re-enact his death, although he is not able to say what is used. The participant also states that "you can find it online anywhere" when referring to the ritual, indicating that at least some of what is available online to non-members is accurate.

Religion

Religion is mentioned in the documentary as requirement for joining the Freemasons. This is echoed in the initial interview when the participant notes that "you have to believe in a supreme being, or a higher power, something other than yourself." Given this requirement is noted in both the documentary and the interview it can be assumed that it is a requirement for joining the group, although the documentary and the participant differ on what is required. The participant states that "it can be organized religion, you can be Agnostic, it doesn't matter," whereas the documentary purports that Agnostics and Atheists are not welcome. Religion is also mentioned by the participant in both interviews as something that is not discussed in the lodge, due to previous incidents in which the topic has started arguments among members. This may be related to the members belonging to a variety of religions, and as such having different opinions about the subject.

Despite the various religious groups involved, the Freemasons deny they are a religious organization. However, religion is mentioned in tandem with the symbol "G." As the participant and the documentary both note that it represents God, the question arises as to why they have a symbol for God if they are not a religious organization. In response to this question, the participant explained that God is represented in a number of different ways in various religions, and that it is not just as one religion interprets God to be. This response, however, does not answer the question. Having the symbol represent a variety of religions does not negate the concept of being a religious organization, but rather reinforces the idea that they have God represented in their own way. This in turn supports the idea that the Freemasons have a different definition of religion, which may dispel some of the mystery surrounding the question about whether or not they are a religious organization. If the Freemasons define religion in a way contrary to how general society understands it then it is truly a semantic miscommunication between factions about what the term "religion" means.

Conspiracies

A variety of conspiracy theories were presented in the documentary as potentially factual information available to non-members. Discussed below is a sample of these theories and the responses from the participant either

confirming or denying the stories. Please see the attached appendix for a full explanation of the conspiracy theories discussed.

Jack the Ripper

The story of Jack the Ripper is one that the participant denied on the basis of the requirements of membership to the Freemasons. According to the participant, Jack the Ripper could not have been a Freemason because “if you are unfit, if you are immoral, if you commit a crime against God, you’re out,” and this has always been a rule. Since his actions as a serial killer most definitely made him unfit, he would not have been allowed to be a Mason. However, the participant previously stated in the interview that breaking the oaths results in the member being expelled from the group suggesting that Jack the Ripper could have been a Freemason at the time of the murders, but been removed from the group as a result of his crimes. The participant also notes that the entire scenario could not have been a cover story provided by the Freemasons because “in those days they didn’t have the medical technology to find out who the father was, so that tells me right there that whole reasoning is out.” This response does not negate the potential for Prince Edward to be protecting his reputation and nipping the issue in the bud. The possibility exists that the Freemasons have knowledge about the situation that they do not wish to share. As well, it should be considered that the participant may not be privy to all the information the organization has.

The Shooting of an Initiate and the Story of Hiram Abiff

These two theories are somewhat related in that the former contains information about a ritual with its roots in the latter. The participant denied that anyone could have been shot during an initiation because the Freemasons do not use guns in their re-enactments, and also that Hiram Abiff was not killed with a gun. Therefore, the ritual could not have been a re-enactment of his death. In regards to the story of Hiram Abiff, the participant and the documentary provide very similar accounts of what happened, suggesting that some information available to non-members is accurate. Both renditions agree that Hiram was the lead builder of King Solomon’s temple, and that Hiram was killed by three lesser Freemasons who were trying to steal the password to the third degree from Hiram. The password provided in the documentary cannot be verified as accurate due to the participant being unable to share that information.

The Knights Templar and the Symbol of the Skull and Crossbones

The explanation of the history of the Knights Templar provided in the documentary was somewhat accurate according to the participant, although not all of the details were correct. The documentary was correct in that the Knights Templar were arrested by the King of France due to the King naming them as

blasphemers. The participant added that the King turned on the group because he was unable to pay them the money he owed them, and that the arrests happened on Friday the 13th, leading to the superstition behind the date. The documentary suggests that after many of the Knights Templar were arrested, they were forced to turn to piracy to continue their work, and used the skull and crossbones as a pirate flag. The participant denies this, explaining that the skull and crossbones was on the group's marine battle flag, and was eventually adapted into a pirate symbol.

The Incident at Black Friar's Bridge

When asked about this incident the participant replied that he was not familiar with the story at all. The interviewer provided a short summary of the incident, including the theory that the entire event was a cover-up by Freemasons who were involved with politics. The reply was that like religion, the Freemasons do not discuss politics in their lodge meetings, and that the lodge does not get involved in such things. This response again may be denial of true events in order to maintain the group's secrets, or it may be truly be something that had nothing to do with the Freemasons.

This story centers on a banker who ran an underground lodge that acted as an intermediary between banks and politicians, and that the Freemasons had a plan to overthrow the Italian government. This story has implications on power relations in two ways. First, if the lodge did in fact act as a middle man between bankers and politicians this suggests that the Freemasons are part of the Power Elite described by Mills. As Mills (1956) explains, "major national power now resides in the economic, the political, and the military domains" (p. 230) and that "this triangle of power is the source of the interlocking directorate that is most important for the historical structure of the present (p. 231). The economic power by the banker and the government power by the politician interact to reinforce each other and build more power for the Freemasons. Secondly, if politics are a part of the Freemasons agenda then the denial expressed by the participant indicates that this is another topic that the members are not permitted to share with non-members. Keeping political secrets could have a tremendous impact on society.

Discussion

When the interviews were conducted, it was assumed that any information provided by the participant could be considered truthful, and therefore used as a definitive measure of the accuracy of the information available to non-members. However, the group's insistence on keeping a vast majority of information secret has led to concerns about the validity of the responses provided by the participant, particularly in regards to conspiracy theories and the activities of the group. As the Freemasons are known for keeping secrets, the possibility exists that stories were denied that are in fact true, but are not to be shared with non-members. Some information was readily provided, such as the

process for becoming a member and the requirements each member must meet. This information can be considered accurate as it was provided without hesitation, and therefore can be acknowledged as information that the Freemasons do not mind non-members knowing.

There was also some conflicting information provided by the participant. Below is an excerpt from the initial interview in which the interviewer is asking questions about what kinds of members there are in the group. Previously the interviewer had asked about the requirements for being a Freemason, and some of the requirements are "you can't have a criminal record, you cannot...um...solicit or use drugs, or alcohol. Um...you're allowed to drink, obviously, but you're not allowed to be an alcoholic":

Interviewer: Have you formed any friendships with anybody from the group outside the lodge?

Participant: Mmhmm...Um, there's a gentleman named [name removed], he's a pretty good friend of mine. I see him all the time outside lodge, also because he's an alcoholic.

Interviewer: But you can't be a mason if you're an alcoholic.

Participant: Well...he likes to drink.

This response indicates that either the information provided previously by the participant is not accurate, or that the Freemasons are willing to bend the rules about what is required to be a member. Overall, any information available to non-members that can be verified as truthful does not provide a great deal of insight into the group's activities, past or present. This secrecy adds to the mystery of the Freemasons, ensuring outsiders' interest will continue.

To be able to fully understand the Freemasons, in-depth study is required. The element of secrecy and exclusive membership will be the most difficult to overcome when attempting research. Due to this concern, ethnographic research may be the most effective method. The insights that could be gathered by firsthand observations of the rituals, practices, and norms would be instrumental in understanding how the group operates. However, if there is any truth to the potential punishments for speaking publicly about the secrets of the group any researcher inserting himself (given the group, it would be limited to male researchers) could potentially face harsh retribution for publishing his results. As well, the amount of deception that would be required to infiltrate the group would require the researcher to create an alternative life. As the process for being considered for initiation is quite thorough, the researcher would need to be comfortable lying about not only his true purpose for joining, but also participating in bonding rituals and ceremonies that are designed to promote brotherhood. This is likely to be something many researchers are not willing to do, as the emotional strain it would place on the researcher would be immense.

Further, the members of the chosen lodge are all a part of the community in which the lodge is located, so barring moving to another city the researcher runs the risk of continually interacting with the participants post-research in everyday life.

In place of ethnographic research, extensive interviews are the next best option for determining what is true about the Freemasons. Inferences made from the data provided, but one participant cannot be assumed to be completely accurate. This is partly because the participant is relatively new to the lodge and has not yet passed through all the degrees, each of which comes with its own education, and also partly because different members will have had different experiences with the Freemasons and thus will provide different definitions and explanations for terms and events. Also, members who have been with the lodge longer or who are in higher positions may be privy to information that new members are not. In addition, the participant erred on the side of caution when providing answers, and may have held back information that he thought was secret that could in fact be shared. Another member who has belonged to the group for longer may have better knowledge about what can and cannot be shared, and be able to provide more thorough answers.

Another area of study of interest is the perceptions the members have of the group. Whether the initiate views the group as a social gathering, an opportunity for networking, a charity group, or an ancient fraternity created to safeguard secrets could influence how he perceives his own actions and the actions of others in the Freemasons, as well as the importance of the rituals. As well, given the beginning of the membership process for an interested man is to talk to members known to him, there is a distinct possibility that each potential candidate is told something different about what the group is and what they do. This could affect how the new member views the group once he is initiated, and therefore what information he passes on to new initiates. In addition, older members may have knowledge that younger members do not, as they may have received information when they were initiated that has not been passed down.

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Appendix

Conspiracy Theories from:

“Freemasonry Revealed: Secret History of the Freemasons”

Each conspiracy theory about the Freemasons is slightly different depending where the story is heard and who is telling it. For the purposes of this paper, the questions regarding the truth of any conspiracy theories were formed using the conspiracies mentioned in the documentary “Freemasonry Revealed: Secret History of the Freemasons.” Below is an explanation of the conspiracies mentioned in the film.

Jack the Ripper:

In London, England 1888, five women were stabbed to death, and had their internal organs removed. Their killer was never identified. There were two letters, “Vs” carved into the women’s cheeks, and their aprons were cut in half. The police found the rest of an apron a short way from one of the victims that had been used to clean the knife. On the wall next to the apron there was an inscription mentioning the three Jews who had killed Hiram Abiff. This inscription was supposedly destroyed on the orders of the police commissioner, who was a Freemason. Some believe the murders were a way to protect the reputation of Prince Edward, who had had an affair with a prostitute and gotten her pregnant. She had told four other women about it, thus accounting for the five victims. In this version, the man responsible is the Queen’s personal physician, who was a Freemason, and contacted in order to keep the reputation of the Prince intact, as he was either a Freemason himself or a supporter.

The Shooting of an Initiate:

In New York in 2004, William James was shot to death by a Freemason. According to the conspiracy theory, he was shot in the process of being initiated into a lodge during a ritual that involved being blindfolded and “shot” at. The ritual was supposed to be completed using blanks and tin cans instead of live ammunition; however, the man responsible used real bullets. The man responsible plead guilty and was expelled from the lodge. The lodge however, denied that the ritual involved a gun at all, leaving the question of what actually happened unanswered.

The Story of Hiram Abiff and King Solomon's Temple:

This story is supposedly the basis of the ritual to the third degree. Three thousand years ago, King Solomon built a temple for God, and chose a stonemason named Hiram Abiff to be the lead builder. Being a mason, Hiram knew the password to the third degree. When the temple was almost completed, three lesser masons confronted him and wanted to know the password. He refused to tell them, and so they killed him using the tools of the masons as weapons. King Solomon learned Hiram was missing, and sent a search party. Once the truth was discovered, the three lesser masons were sentenced to death for the murder of Hiram. King Solomon then established a new password that was never to be spoken in public, and is the current password to the third degree. According to the documentary, this password is MAHABONE. One of the rituals of the Freemasons is allegedly re-enacting the murder of Hiram, and if the oath taken during the ritual is broken, he who broke it will be killed.

The Knights Templar:

Freemasonry Revealed introduces the Knights Templar as a group of warrior monks dedicated to protecting Christ. They were essentially "spiritual special forces for Christ" that used King Solomon's temple as a headquarters. Given their job, they were paid a great deal of money. In part, they were meant to protect a treasure inside the temple. Some say the treasure is the Holy Grail, others say it is head of Christ, and yet others suggest it is two stone pillars containing the bloodline of Christ. The King of France accused the Knights Templar of blasphemy, and arrested as many of them as he could. This forced them to go into hiding, and as a result they turned to piracy to continue their work. This is supposedly how the skull and bones symbol came to be used by pirates.

Yale University's Skull and Bones Club:

This is fraternity that allegedly recruits the sons of the most powerful people at Yale University. Previous members are said to include Roosevelt, both George Bushes, and Senator John Kerry. Similar to the Freemasons they have secret rituals they do not share with anyone. They also fly a pirate flag, and suggest that the Freemasons are the latest incarnation in the stream of ancient knowledge.

The Incident at Black Friar's Bridge:

On June 18, 1982 Roberto Calvi was found hanging below Black Friar's Bridge in London, England. He was the chairman of one of the largest banks in Italy, and was known as "God's banker." When his body was found, the police also found a fake passport, \$15,000 in cash, and his pockets were filled with bricks. A few weeks before his death, he had gone to court over the issue of 1.4 million dollars missing from the bank, which had been

laundered through the bank and moved to Latin America. An analysis found that he had not touched the bricks in his pockets, that it was possible for the underneath of the bridge to be reached from a boat at the time of his death, and that the injuries on his neck were inconsistent with a hanging. However, his death was ruled a suicide. One theory suggests that it was the work of the Italian Mafia, although many others believe it was a cover-up by the Freemasons. This theory is based on the idea that the bricks symbolize the original stonemasons, and that there is a lodge very close to the bridge with a secret group that is also named Black Friar. As well, Calvi was a member of the P2 lodge, and he allegedly ran a clandestine lodge. His son said P2 lodge was an intermediary between the banks and the politicians, and that there was a plot by the Freemasons to take over the Italian government. There is also the factor that the Catholic Church was involved, as Calvi was Catholic and many people believe the church to be against the Freemasons.