Source of a Different Color

One out of four blacks say The Man made AIDS

September 1, 1999 By Gabi Horn

HIV was developed by U.S. government scientists as a means to exterminate the black population. So say 27 percent of African Ameri-cans, according to a first-ever NIH-funded study published in May's *Preventative Medicine* magazine.

"It's newish-old news," said lead researcher Elizabeth Klonoff. "If you talk closely to African Americans, you'll find that AIDS-conspiracy theories are fairly pervasive. The data only surprised white people." (Klonoff is white; the study's co-author, Hope Landrine, is black.)

The study, which questioned 520 black adults in 10 California 'hoods, took its cue from a Southern Christian Leadership Conference survey finding that 54 percent of blacks viewed HIV tests as a ploy to infect them with the virus. While Klonoff's study found no difference of opinion based on income, it did show that African Americans who graduated from college were more likely to hold conspiracy views than were high-school grads (28 percent vs. 19 percent).

One explanation, Klonoff said, is that those more highly educated are more aware of the notorious Tuskegee study, during which federal researchers monitored—but refused to treat—black men with syphilis between 1932 and 1972.

Klonoff also noted that the correlation between conspiracy belief and experience of racism was the strongest. Men, who reported a higher number of racist encounters than women, were 3.5 times more likely to say that AIDS is man-made.

Yet Klonoff doesn't agree with actor Will Smith, who famously said in July's *Vanity Fair*, "Possibly AIDS was created as a result of biological-warfare testing." But, she added, "What is there to counteract conspiracy theories? A promise from the government that it won't repeat Tuskegee?"

"I don't tell folks what to believe," said Timothy Benson, program manager of GMHC's Soul Food (see "Mom's Recipe"). "What I do tell them is that even if AIDS *was* man-made, you still have the power to remain uninfected."

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