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Paganism and Counseling: The Development of a Clinical Resource

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Abstract: Sensitivity to religious diversity is an important part of multiculturally competent psychotherapy in the United States, but few resources exist for working with Pagan clients. Using a simultaneous parallel interviewing procedure, we reviewed the literature, conducted qualitative interviews with, and solicited online feedback from Pagans, to write a manuscript on culturally-sensitive therapy with followers of Paganism. Our participant-informant experts indicated that Paganism is nature-oriented, rooted in historical beliefs and practices, polytheistic, and revering the feminine divine. Pagans believe in harming none and judging no one, celebrate many different holidays and worship rituals, believe in multiple deities, cosmic balance, Magic, and an afterlife, and often have spiritual or mystical experiences. Pagan character traits include open-mindedness, individualism, multiculturalism, experientialism, feminism, sex, and sexuality. Participants described encountering many stereotypes of Pagans, including evil Pagans, teenaged Goth chicks, witches, New Age Hippies, just a phase, sex-crazed perverts, and within-Pagan stereotypes. They described their attitudes about mental health and psychotherapy, and (perhaps idiosyncratic to our sample) they also described a process of religious identity development similar to the sexual identity development of people who are GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered). We discuss recommendations for counselors and psychotherapists, including assessment and diagnostic issues, the client/counselor relationship, sense of humor, autonomy and personal responsibility, stigmatization, relationships, sex and sexuality, identity issues, ethical issues, and Pagans as healers.

Keywords: Pagan; Paganism; simultaneous parallel interviewing; participant-informant experts; multiculturally competent psychotherapy; culturally-sensitive religiously-sensitive therapy

Sensitivity to religious diversity is an important part of multiculturally competent psychotherapy in the United States.¹ The American Counseling Association's (1995) Code of Ethics calls upon counselors to "actively attempt to understand the diverse cultural backgrounds of the clients with whom they work".² This includes the religious beliefs, values, and backgrounds of clients.³ Likewise, the American Psychological Association's (2010) Code of Ethics states that "where scientific or professional knowledge in the discipline of psychology establishes that an understanding of factors associated with...religion...is essential for effective implementation of their services or research, psychologists have or obtain the training, experience,

¹ Arredondo, Toporek, Brown, Sanchez, Locke, Sanchez, and Stadler, "Operationalization", 42-78; ASERVIC, *Competencies*, n.p.

² American Counseling Association, *ACA Code*, 2.01b.

³ Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis, "Multicultural Counseling", 477-486.

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consultation, or supervision necessary to ensure the competence of their services".⁴ When a therapist sees a client who comes from a major religion such as Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism, the therapist has a wide variety of resources to choose from – both scholarly and mass-market – to use in becoming familiar with how to counsel people who belong to that religion. Virtually absent from the research literature on psychotherapy, though, is information about Paganism.

Paganism, sometimes called "The Old Religion", is a comparatively small but growing group of religions in the United States today.⁵ As a growing religious demographic, Paganism has attracted thousands of followers. U.S. census data puts the number of Pagans in the United States alone at around 682,000.⁶ Yet Paganism is often stigmatized, especially in the United States and Canada.⁷ Although this stigma is lessening,⁸ it still exists, and because of it, Paganism is largely hidden, often practiced in secret. Therefore, it is possible that most psychotherapists will encounter multiple Pagan clients over the course of a career without even realizing it.

Defining Paganism

Paganism is a term used to describe a variety of religions. Much as Christianity is a blanket term that includes many different denominations such as Presbyterian, Methodist, Catholic, and Quaker, and "Native American religion" refers to many different religions on the North and South American continents, Paganism is a term that includes many different religions, including Egyptian Religion, Norse Paganism, European-American Shamanism, Ecofeminist Spirituality, Neo-Paganism, and Wicca.⁹ In its broadest meaning, Paganism includes all the indigenous religions of the world which are not monotheistic,¹⁰ or any pre-Christian, Jewish, or Islamic religion that lacks a prophet or book, such as ancient Greek or Indian religion.¹¹ Berger, Leach, and Shaffer pointed out:

Pagan is a term that denotes a variety of spiritual paths and traditions that spring from history and mythology and differ from the major monotheistic religions. No "policy" statement can encompass all groups and beliefs except that we stand together to be allowed true religious freedom, acceptance, and recognition.¹²

What all Pagan religions have in common, though, is a nature-oriented and in many ways polytheistic spirituality.¹³

Paganism has often been defined inaccurately as "pre-Christian indigenous religions" or as "one of a people or community observing a polytheistic religion".¹⁴ While this describes the majority of Pagan religions, there are many historical Pagan traditions that were not pre-Christian and not indigenous to their places of worship,¹⁵ and there are some Pagans who are not strictly polytheist, believing in a supreme deity. (Most still believe in subordinate deities, so technically they are henotheists, but to outside observers, they appear to be polytheists).¹⁶ Pagans have also been incorrectly labeled as "nonbeliever[s] in Western

⁴ American Psychological Association, *APA Code*, 2.01b.

⁵ Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1-247; Kelly, "Update", 136-151; Jorgensen and Russell, "American", 325-338.

⁶ Moe, Cates, and Sepulveda, "Wicca", 38-48.

⁷ Brown, *Voices*, E; Crocker, "In the Cards", 90-91; Foltz, "Women's Spirituality", 413; Reid, "Renovating", 128-130.

⁸ Reid, "Renovating", 128-140.

⁹ Berger and Ezzy, "Mass Media", 501-514; Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1-247; Kirkpatrick, Rainey, and Rubi, "Empirical Study", 33-38; Pike, "New Age", 1-256.

¹⁰ Berger et al., *Voices*, 1-232.

¹¹ Shukla, "Body, Health", 131-135.

¹² Berger et al., *Voices*, 89.

¹³ Albrecht, "Virgin", 171-193; Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1-247; Moe et al., "Wicca", 38-48.

¹⁴ Flexner and Hauck, *Random House*, 1394.

¹⁵ Davies, *Paganism*, 1-160.

¹⁶ Cameron, *Last*, 1-896.

culture,”¹⁷ “those who did not embrace Christianity or any of the other monotheistic faiths”,¹⁸ or “irreligious or hedonistic person[s]”¹⁹ – meanings derived directly from the Latin word *paganus*, which meant “rural”, “civilian”, or “peasant” and later “worshipper of false gods”.²⁰ These are pejorative definitions with negative connotations, which when added to the fact that many people worldwide perceive Pagans as evil witches or devil-worshippers, leads to the stigmatization of Paganism.²¹

Here, the term Paganism is used to refer to a collection of religions that originated in history and mythology and are characterized by a nature-oriented spirituality which is essentially polytheistic (or at least appears to be to outsiders). The word Pagan is capitalized to signify that it refers to a religion (or collection of religions). Some people use the term Neo-Pagan to differentiate the modern form from ancient forms of Paganism,²² and some people distinguish modern Pagans from historical pagans by capitalizing the former and leaving the latter uncapitalized.²³ Paganism is essentially a rebirth of interest in ancient indigenous pagan religions, few of which have been continually practiced since ancient times, as many of them were replaced or driven out by Christianity, Islam, and other major religions.²⁴ Out of respect, we made an intentional decision to use the term Pagan in preference to the terms pagan or Neo-Pagan, since we were concerned that the latter two terms might have pejorative connotations.

Contemporary Background of Paganism

In the United States today, there are many kinds of contemporary Paganism, a term which is often used to refer to the religiousness of “people who were raised in monotheistic traditions but have rejected them in favour of revivals and recreations of pre-Christian traditions”.²⁵ Wicca, Shamanism, Druidism, Reconstructionism, and Eclectic Paganism are the largest groups, although contemporary Paganism encompasses many traditions, including Goddess spiritualities and Heathenism. Wicca has many branches, including Dianic, Gardnerian, Greco-Roman, and Celtic Wicca, while Shamanism includes thousands of indigenous religions, tribal faiths, or “primal spiritualities” around the world.²⁶ Druidism is an ancient pre-Celtic form of Shamanism originating in the United Kingdom. Reconstructionism consists of groups of people who reconstruct ancient religions using research and historical texts; the three largest groups are Asatru (Norse/Germanic), Kemeticism (Egyptian), and Celtic Reconstructionism. In Eclectic Paganism, practitioners borrow from many cultural traditions to create their religious beliefs and practices.²⁷ Nearly all forms of contemporary Paganism emphasize the sacredness of nature, usually expressed through connection to pre-Christian deities, and often in opposition to Christianity. Pagans often use self-authority, creativity, and diversity in their beliefs and practices, using a complex romanticized imagery from historical and literary sources to reconstruct traditional or historical Paganism, giving them religious and spiritual practices with both cultural and personal significance.²⁸

The research literature on the topic has shown that Paganism in the United States is earth-based and nature-oriented, polytheistic yet also monotheistic, emphasizing both immanence and transcendence, both animism and spiritism, interconnectedness, justice, respectfulness, magic, cyclicity, and sexuality, but is also a stigmatized form of faith. (It is important to note that Pagans in other parts of the world do not necessarily share all of these characteristics.) Nature is sacred in Paganism, as nearly every Pagan religion

17 Davy, *Introduction*, 2.

18 Ibid.

19 Flexner and Hauck, *Random House*, 1394.

20 Ibid.

21 Berger et al., *Voices*, 1-232; Brown, “Voices”, E; Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1-247; Crocker, “In the Cards”, 3579; Davy, *Introduction*, 1-254; Foltz, “Women’s Spirituality”, 409-418; Hutton, *Triumph*, 1-512; Reid, “Renovating”, 128-140.

22 Berger et al., *Voices*, 1-232.

23 Davy, *Introduction*, 1-254.

24 Berger et al., *Voices*, 1-232.

25 Davy, *Introduction*, 2.

26 Ezzy and Berger, “Witchcraft”, 165-180; Hume, “Creating”, 309-319; Hutton, “Status”, 121-131; Olsson, “Psychotherapy”, 263-276.

27 McColman, *Complete*, 1-362; Moe et al., “Wicca”, 38-48.

28 Davy, *Introduction*, 1-254.

(perhaps every one) reveres nature as sacred; in fact, Paganism is sometimes referred to as earth-based religion or earth-based spirituality.²⁹ Paganism is typically thought of as polytheistic, but it is in fact both polytheistic and monotheistic, emphasizing both unity and diversity: followers perceive a diversity of different deities, both female and male, but many see these as merely aspects of an underlying deity, sacred essence, or life force which they believe is found in all things.³⁰ Pagans believe that the divine is both immanent, or immediately present in all things, and transcendent, or amounting to more than the sum of those things' attributes.³¹ Pagan beliefs are also characterized by both animism, the belief that "all of nature is alive and imbued with spiritual 'energy'",³² and spiritism, the belief that this energy can communicate with humans.³³ Because Pagans see all things as containing a unifying, sacred essence, they also see things as being fundamentally interconnected by this essence, working together and shaping one another.³⁴ Consequently, Pagans often view the universe as an inherently just place,³⁵ and they tend to value respectfulness very highly.³⁶ Another concept commonly associated with Paganism is Magic³⁷ (capitalized, sometimes spelled Magick), "the art of sensing and shaping the subtle, unseen forces that flow throughout the world, of awakening deeper levels of consciousness beyond the rational".³⁸ The worldview of Pagans is also cyclical, with time viewed as nonlinear or cyclical, going through periods of birth, growth, death, and rebirth.³⁹ Sexuality is also an important part of the intentional world of Pagans, as Paganism celebrates feminism, sexuality, and an egalitarian worldview.⁴⁰ Paganism rejects patriarchal ideologies and is empowering to women, emphasizing the worship of Goddess figures while highlighting the unique abilities and rights of women, providing an egalitarian worldview that is much more affirming to women.⁴¹ Additionally, the number of references to GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered) issues that appear in the scant literature on Paganism⁴² suggest that there may be a higher incidence of GLBT individuals in Paganism than in the general population⁴³ – perhaps as many as 33-40% of people who identify as Pagan also identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered, according to national surveys.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Paganism remains stigmatized; Pagans have been fired from their jobs, lost custody battles over their children, and had their homes threatened because of prejudice towards Paganism.⁴⁵ Thus many Pagans remain "in the broom closet"⁴⁶ – they keep their beliefs hidden and never admit to anyone but their closest family members and friends that they are Pagan.

²⁹ Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1-247; Davy, *Introduction*, 1-254; Ezzy, "Popular", 29-53; Harwood, "Beyond Poetry", 375-390; Hutton, *Triumph*, 1-512; Kelly, "Update", 136-151; Kennedy, "Nature's Children", 22-23; Moe et al., "Wicca", 38-48; Spretnak, "Green", 24-27.

³⁰ Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1-247; Fox, *Introduction*, 1; Kelly, "Update", 136-151; Starhawk, *Dreaming*, 9-10.

³¹ Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1-247; Moe et al., "Wicca", 38-48; Starhawk, *Dreaming*, 9; Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, n.p.; Tairu, "Religion", 379-394.

³² Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 30.

³³ Ibid., 1-247.

³⁴ Harwood, "Beyond Poetry", 375-390; Moe et al., "Wicca", 38-48.

³⁵ Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1-247.

³⁶ Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1-247; Davy, *Introduction*, 1-254; Harwood, "Beyond Poetry", 375-390; Hutton, *Triumph*, 1-512; Warwick, "Feminist Wicca", 121-133.

³⁷ Adler, *Drawing*, 8; Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1-247; Davy, *Introduction*, 1-254; Gordon, "Magic", 1-150; Hutton, *Triumph*, 1-512; Lynch, "Occult", 281-298; Luhrmann, "Persuasions", 1-396; Moe et al., "Wicca", 38-48; Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, 27; Wise, "Process Epistemology", 199-211.

³⁸ Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, 27.

³⁹ Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1-247; Harvey, *Contemporary*, 1-272.

⁴⁰ Christ, *Rebirth*, 1-238; Coleman, "Why 'God'", 117-127; Goldenberg, *Changing*, 1-160; Jade, *To know*, 1-174; Kraemer, "Gender", 390-401; Lynch, "Occult", 281-298; Salomonsen, *Enchanted*, 1-318; Warwick, "Feminist Wicca", 121-133.

⁴¹ Christ, *Rebirth*, 1-238; Jade, *To know*, 1-174; Goldenberg, *Changing*, 1-160; Warwick, "Feminist Wicca", 121-133.

⁴² E.g., in Foltz, "Women's Spirituality", 409-418; Vaz, "Woman", 57-69; Warwick, "Feminist Wicca", 121-133.

⁴³ Smith and Horne, "Gay", 235-248.

⁴⁴ Berger et al., *Voices*, 1-232; Lewis and Tollefson, "Gender", 61-78.

⁴⁵ Brown, *Voices*, E; Cookson, "Reports", 723-748; Cornish, "Spelling", 14-28; Moe et al., "Wicca", 38-48; Warwick, "Feminist Wicca", 121-133.

⁴⁶ Davy, *Introduction*, 1; Jensen and Thompson, "Broom Closet", 753; Warwick, "Feminist Wicca", 131.

Purpose

Many therapists have gone through their entire careers without seeing a single Pagan client – or without knowing that they have seen a Pagan client. Because of the stigma associated with the religion, it is very possible that a Pagan client would choose not to disclose their religious background to their therapist. If a therapist were to learn, though, that a client in counseling was Pagan, virtually no resources exist to guide that therapist in counseling Pagans. The purpose of this study was to learn more about Pagans, including their religious beliefs and practices, and their attitudes about mental health and psychotherapy. We conducted interviews with Pagan college students using a qualitative research methodology. Our goal was to seek clinically useful information about Pagans that might be helpful to psychotherapists who on occasion might work with Pagan clients.

Method

Participants

The participants were ten college students at a medium-sized Midwestern University who had all identified themselves as Pagan for two to ten years. Five were male and five were female. They ranged in age from 19 to 31 and in academic standing from first year college student to just graduated college. All were Caucasian. Seven of them identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. All participants were members of the Society of Earth-Based Religions, a student-run campus organization comprised mostly of Pagan students.

Participant 1: Doug⁴⁷

20-year-old, never married Caucasian heterosexual male who was a Junior in college (finishing second year) – Raised Lutheran – 6 years Pagan: Gnosticism (interview: 4/26/05 – Protocol 1 first)

Participant 2: John

21 year-old, living with significant other Caucasian bisexual male who was a Senior in college – Raised Reformed Baptist – 6-7 years Pagan: Celtic Reconstructionist (interview: 4/26/05 – Protocol 2 first)

Participant 3: Samantha

22-year-old, engaged Caucasian bisexual female who was a Senior in college – Raised Christian – 7 years Pagan: Eclectic (interview: 4/27/05 – Protocol 1 first)

Participant 4: Joe

19-year-old, never married Caucasian gay/other (“I fall in love with who I fall in love for”) male who was a Freshman in college – Raised Methodist and Neo-hippie – At least 10 years Pagan: Eclectic (interview: 4/27/05 – Protocol 2 first)

Participant 5: Nicole

20-year-old, never married Caucasian bisexual female who was a sophomore in college – Raised Roman Catholic – 5 years Pagan: Wiccan/Eclectic (interview: 4/27/05 – Protocol 1 first)

Participant 6: Amber

19-year-old, never married Caucasian heterosexual female who was a freshman in college – Raised Baptist – 2 years Pagan: Eclectic – Hindu (Shiva & Kali Ma) and Egyptian (Anubis & Isis) and “looking for something else” (interview: 4/27/05 – Protocol 2 first)

⁴⁷ All names of participants have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

Participant 7: Jonathan

22-year-old, never married Caucasian bisexual male who was a Senior in college – Raised Catholic/Non-denominational Christian – 5 years Pagan: Eclectic, Discordian (interview: 4/29/05 – Protocol 2 first)

Participant 8: Jack

31-year-old, never married/living with significant other Caucasian heterosexual male who had been a Senior earlier that year (just graduated from college in December) – Raised Lutheran – 3 years Pagan: “Reconstructionist?” (interview: 4/29/05 – Protocol 1 first)

Participant 9: Amy

21-year-old, never married/living with significant other Caucasian bisexual female who was a Junior in college – Raised Unitarian Universalist – 5 years (“or forever”) Pagan: “I have no idea” what tradition (interview: 4/26/05 – Protocol 2 first)

Participant 10: Laura

24-year-old, never married/living with significant other Caucasian lesbian female who was a 5th-year Senior in college – Raised Catholic/LDS – 4 years Pagan: Asatru (interview: 5/05/05 - Protocol 1 first)

Interviewers

Two interviewers conducted all the interviews in this study. One interviewer was a practicing counselor and a Ph.D. student in counseling psychology. He represented a professional, scholarly, etic perspective and served as the counseling “expert”. The other interviewer was a Pagan college student, a 3rd-generation practicing Eclectic/Celtic Pagan raised by Pagan parents, and a member of the Society of Earth-Based Religions. She was already acquainted with all the participants prior to the study. She represented a student, personal, emic perspective and served as the Pagan “expert”.

Instruments

The interviewers utilized three interview protocols administered on two separate occasions. On the first occasion, the Pagan interviewer asked participants questions about Paganism in general, their spiritual identities, and their religious backgrounds (Protocol 1). The counselor interviewer asked participants questions about their experiences in counseling, and what they thought counselors should know about providing effective services to Pagan clients (Protocol 2). On the second occasion, both interviewers asked participants questions from a follow-up interview protocol.

Procedure

A simultaneous parallel interviewing procedure was used in this study, based in part on narrative analysis,⁴⁸ empirical phenomenological qualitative research,⁴⁹ grounded theory,⁵⁰ anthropological ethnography,⁵¹ and Consensual Qualitative Research.⁵² We used narrative analysis by using interviews as the basic unit of inquiry and empirical phenomenological qualitative research by focusing on the socially constructed meaning structure of those interviews. We used grounded theory in that we coded interview data in chunks and grounded our findings, not in hypothesis-testing, but directly in the

⁴⁸ Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 1-832.

⁴⁹ Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation*, 1-536.

⁵⁰ Strauss and Corbin, *Basics*, 1-456.

⁵¹ Cf., Stoller and Olkes, *In Sorcery's Shadow*, 1-252.

⁵² Hill, Thompson, and Williams, “Guide”, 517-572.

socially-shared meanings of participant responses in these interviews. We employed anthropological ethnography by entering into Pagan groups to study their culture, and we used Consensual Qualitative Research to transcribe and analyze the interviews for common themes. Participants were interviewed two at a time. During each interview administration, the two interviewers introduced themselves to the two participants, explained the research project to them, discussed confidentiality, and answered any questions that participants had. Next, the Pagan interviewer remained with one interviewee and interviewed him or her using Protocol 1 (the questions about Paganism). At the same time, the counselor interviewer took the other interviewee to another room and interviewed him or her using Protocol 2 (the questions about counseling). Once both interview protocols had been completed, the interviewers switched rooms and conducted the same protocol again with the other participant. In this way, both interviewees were asked questions from both protocols, but the Pagan interviewer always administered Protocol 1 and the counselor interviewer always administered Protocol 2. Interviewing two participants at a time, the order of the interview protocols was systematically counterbalanced so that the group which received one protocol first did not systematically differ in gender, race, or age from the group which received the other protocol first.

After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed and analyzed for common themes, using Consensual Qualitative Research methodology.⁵³ At the same time, another researcher (a Pagan psychologist with a Masters degree in Library Science) conducted an extensive review of the published literature on Paganism and counseling. The themes that emerged from the interviews were synthesized with the observations that were gleaned from the literature review, and all three researchers used them to write an unpublished manuscript about Pagan issues in counseling.

The manuscript was distributed to the original ten participants, who were invited back to participate in a follow-up interview asking them for feedback on the manuscript – what they liked about it, what they didn't like, what it got right, what it got wrong, what they would add to it, and what they would change about it. This follow-up interview served as a participant check. Finally, the manuscript was placed on the World Wide Web, on a website that was announced on popular Pagan websites, listservs, and e-mail distribution lists, and which contained keywords which allowed it to show up on Internet search engines. The website was also advertised through word of mouth among several Pagan communities. Pagan visitors to the website were invited to submit their feedback on the manuscript. This served as a broader “participant check”, as feedback was solicited from a much larger sample of Pagans. Both the original participants and the independent online feedback received from Pagans who were not interviewed indicated that the manuscript was a fair and accurate portrayal of Paganism in the United States.

Results

Using Consensual Qualitative Research methodology, core ideas from the interviews were grouped into 45 domains, which in turn were classified into six broad categories, or main themes that cut across interviews. The seven themes that emerged from the participant interviews were the essential characteristics of Paganism, basic beliefs and practices of Paganism, character traits of Pagans, stereotypes of Pagans, Pagan attitudes about mental health and psychotherapy, Pagan identity development, and recommendations for counselors and psychotherapists. The 45 domains within the seven categories are listed in Table 1.

⁵³ Hill et al., “Guide”, 517-572.

Table 1: Interview Results: Domains and Categories

Categories	Domains
The Essential Characteristics of Paganism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feminine Divine • Historical Beliefs and Practices
Basic Beliefs and Practices of Paganism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Afterlife • Cosmic Balance, Karma, and the Threefold Law • Foundational Principles • Holidays
Character Traits of Pagans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experientialism • Feminism • Individualism • Multiculturalism
Stereotypes of Pagans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pagans as Evil • Pagans as (Green-Skinned, Broom-Riding) Witches • Paganism as “Just a Phase” • Pagans as New Age Hippies • Pagans as Sex-Crazed Perverts
Pagan Attitudes about Mental Health and Psychotherapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pagan Attitudes about Mental Health and Psychotherapy
Identity Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1) Pre-Pagan – Preawareness • 2) Becoming Pagan – Conversion • 3) New Pagan – Exploration • 4) Growing Pagan – Negotiation
Recommendations for Counseling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment and Diagnostic Issues • Autonomy and Personal Responsibility • Client/Counselor Relationship • Ethical Issues • Gender, Sex, and Sexuality
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5) Maturing Pagan – Integrated Awareness • Dual Identity Development for GLBT Pagans • Identity Issues • Pagans as Healers • Relationships • Sense of Humor • Stigmatization, Suspiciousness, and Isolation • Ways to Identify a Pagan

Discussion

Based on our interviews, we found that people who considered themselves to be Pagan have a naturalistic view on religion and spirituality, have an open view on sex and sexuality, and have a general awareness of the stigmas and stereotypes that surround their belief system. All of the interviewees converted to Paganism from another religion, usually Christianity. Most of the interviewees considered Paganism to be an earth-based spirituality and religion. They also considered it to be a polytheistic faith, at least superficially – though many of the participants considered Paganism to be both polytheistic and monotheistic. Notably, the interviewees were less likely to seek counseling or accept medication, instead preferring to seek alternatives such as meditation. Many of the participants had very similar worries and concerns about the stigmatization of Paganism. Additionally, many of the Pagan college students we interviewed described a religious coming-out process – termed “coming out of the broom closet” – which was very similar to the coming-out process that members of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community have described. Virtually all of the participants noted, however, that no two Pagans are alike – that there is great diversity within Paganism, more so than in most of the world’s major religions, and they expressed a strong desire to be treated as individuals.

The Essential Characteristics of Paganism

Our participants noted that while Paganism is one of the most diverse collections of religions in the world – not one religion, but many – there are nonetheless four essential features that are common to most Pagan traditions. First, nearly every form of Paganism without exception is nature-oriented; nature is an important part of their lives and usually a core part of their faith. They made comments like “all things are connected through nature” (Joe), nature is “a living thing [and] everything has a spirit” (Amber), and “part of you...is directly connected and dependent on nature” (Jonathan). Second, Paganism is rooted in historical beliefs and practices, often concentrated around a specific time period in history. Participants were part of several different movements, including Celtic Reconstructionist, Eclectic, Wiccan, and Asatru (Norse Reconstructionist). Third, Paganism refers to a collection of religions that are polytheistic, with multiple gods and goddesses or spirits – although many Pagan religions are also monotheistic as well. Participants made frequent reference to this. John said, “I’m pretty clearly polytheist”, while Doug described God as “one single entity but manifested in several”, and Laura described “belief in multiple deities” as central to Paganism. Finally, nearly all Pagan religions emphasize the feminine qualities of the divine, and many worship a Mother or Earth Goddess. Nicole said she believes in the “Goddess”, and Samantha worshipped a “High Goddess” and the “balance of male and female”.

When asked to describe Paganism, participants made the following observations:

- Paganism is “any non-Abrahamic religion”, or “any system of beliefs that refuses to categorize itself... It refuses to limit itself... [not] ‘this is what you can’t believe.’ [It] ...embraces all paths” (Doug).
- Paganism involves major natural cycles, emphasizes “this world as opposed to looking at transcendent beings”, and is “somewhat based in the past” (John).
- Paganism is “a collection of various faiths that tend to fall under the ...non-Judeo-Christian-Islamic [religions]” (Samantha).
- Paganism is “a way of life... a way of living into nature and society and all that fun stuff” (Joe).
- “Following a religion that’s kind of based on things that are very old and... things that put an emphasis on nature” (Nicole).
- “Paganism is a term given to loosely apply to one’s particular unique set of views as to what the world is, what it means, and how it works” (Jonathan).
- Paganism is “a religion based around the earth or historical practices or both” (Amy).
- Paganism is “belief in multiple deities” (Laura).

Basic Beliefs and Practices of Paganism

Although our participants talked about many different beliefs and practices, eight general trends emerged in their religious practices and spiritual beliefs. Pagans believe in harming none and judging no one; celebrate many different holidays; have diverse worship rituals; believe in multiple deities, cosmic balance, Magic, and an afterlife; and often have spiritual or mystical experiences.

Foundational principles. First, nearly everyone we interviewed seemed to follow two foundational principles: *harm none* and *judge no one*. Many Pagans believe that all living things are interconnected, so they believe that bringing harm to another is also bringing harm to themselves. Statements included “harming one thing harms a whole cycle” (Amber), “I can do whatever I want as long as I don’t harm anybody, including myself” (Nicole), and “don’t hurt people any more than you have to” (Samantha). Nearly everyone also agreed that being nonjudgmental is a foundational belief of Paganism. Participants noted that “I won’t be close-minded, that I will accept everybody” (Amber) even if they do not agree with them, Paganism has made them more “open-minded” (Samantha), and Paganism calls on them to “love your neighbor... even those who persecute me” (Doug).

Holidays. Second, our interviewees recognized many different holidays, and while they showed no consistency in the holidays they observed, they all recognized eight main Pagan holidays which correspond to the equinoxes (Spring and Autumnal), solstices (Winter and Summer), and cross quarters (the four points between them): Candlemas (Imbolc, Oimelc, Brigid’s Day, merged with Lupercalia/Valentine’s Day),

Ostara (the spring equinox – St. Patrick’s Day, Easter), Beltane (May Eve, May Day, Walspurgis Night), Litha (the summer solstice – Midsummer, St. John’s Day), Lughnasadh (Lammas), Mabon (the autumnal equinox – Michaelmas), Samhain (Halloween, All Hallows Eve, All Saints Day, All Souls Night, Day of the Dead, often the Pagan New Year), and Yule (the winter solstice – Jul, Saturnalia, Christmas, the secular New Year).⁵⁴ Some participants also celebrated up to 13 lunar holidays (full moons and new moons) and some mainstream holidays. Amber stated that she celebrates “Samhain, Beltane, [and] solstices when I can remember when they are”, Samantha said that she “doesn’t celebrate holidays”, and Doug said, “I tend to celebrate more Christian-based holidays, but... only as they relate to a more direct experience” – especially Christmas, as it has “more connection to a more primal... older holiday”.

Worship rituals. Third, participants mentioned a diverse number of Pagan worship rituals. These included celebrating “changing of the seasons” (Jonathan); “meditation”, “prayer”, and “crafts” (John); “worshipping deities” (Samantha); “pay[ing] attention to nature” (Nicole); or recognizing that something is greater than oneself. Many Pagan worship rituals view everyday acts as sacred acts. Joe commented that he worships by “sitting outside, drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette, watching the sunrise, realizing that there’s something greater there”, while Jack said that he goes “to a quiet place” for “meditating” and uses “fire”, and Amy noted that she worships by “saying thanks to the powers, elements, Goddess... singing, drumming, dancing, [and] eating”. Participants noted that many Pagan rituals also celebrate elements of nature, such as the ancient elements of Earth, Water, Air, Fire, and the emotions or character traits they represent, such as physicality and stability (earth), intuition and emotion (water), intellect and creativity (air), and transformation and movement (fire).⁵⁵

Multiple (female) deities. Fourth, unlike members of many of the world’s religions, most of our participants did not view the divine as male and singular, but instead worshipped the Goddess, Gods and Goddesses, or both. They commented that Paganism usually involves “belief in multiple deities” (Laura) and belief in “God and Goddess, personal gods and goddesses” (Joe). Doug said, “I don’t deny the existence of any deity”, and Jonathan said that he does not “disbelieve in any gods”. Many participants considered themselves either polytheists or both polytheistic and monotheistic, some describing a hierarchy of divine beings and some describing Gods and Goddesses as being part of a unified divine whole. John said that he is “pretty clearly polytheist”, Joe noted that he believes in “a singular force... that breaks down into the different deities”, and Samantha described herself as having “a polytheistic-monotheistic viewpoint”, adding that “the gods are different facets of a single gemstone”. Several quoted Starhawk, who described the Goddess as

...the symbol, the normative image of immanence [who] represents the divine embodied in nature, in human beings, in the flesh... not one image but many – a constellation of forms and associations – earth, air, fire, water, moon and star, sun, flower and seed, willow and apple, black, red, white, Maiden, Mother, and Crone. She includes the male in her aspects... Yet the femaleness of the Goddess is primary not to denigrate the male, but because it represents bringing life into the world.⁵⁶

Several participants also referenced a Pagan “trinity” of sorts – Maiden, Mother, and Crone as three aspects of the divine, representing sexuality and strength, healing and mothering, and wisdom and maturity, respectively.⁵⁷

Cosmic balance. Fifth, most of our participants believed in cosmic balance, karma, and the *Threefold Law* – the idea that good and bad are in balance, that good people generally encounter good outcomes while bad people generally encounter bad outcomes, and that the good or bad that a person does will come back to them three times over, respectively. Without exception, all of our participants agreed with the statement that “the good or bad that you do will come back to you”. Doug observed that he believes that “whenever you do something, you put out a certain amount of energy, and the universe has a way of balancing out that energy”.

⁵⁴ Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1:247; Harvey, *Contemporary*, 1:272.

⁵⁵ Yardley, “Social Work”, 329-336.

⁵⁶ Starhawk, *Dreaming*, 9-10.

⁵⁷ Warwick, “Feminist Wicca”, 121-133.

Magic. Sixth, all of our participants believed that Magic exists, though most did not practice it themselves. Some viewed it as a form of prayer, while others viewed it as purely symbolic or ritual. Samantha called Magic “a form of prayer to the deities or elements”, Nicole described it as “a manipulation of energy”, and Doug said that Magic is “a worthy practice” but noted that “I don’t practice it myself”. Jonathan described Magic as “the primal force which sets the universe in motion, which sets consciousness, and thought, and both dreams and reality, that which is real and that which is unreal and everything in between – Magic is the conduit which runs through it”. Some cited Adler, who described Magic as

the mobilization of confidence, will, and emotion brought about by the recognition of necessity; the use of imaginative faculties, particularly the ability to visualize, in order to begin to understand how other beings function in nature so we can use this knowledge to achieve necessary ends.⁵⁸

They noted that Magic functions much like prayer does for Christians or Muslims, or like meditation does for Hindus or Buddhists.

Afterlife. Seventh, most of our participants believed in some form of afterlife, though they generally placed little emphasis on it and their individual views differed widely. Some viewed death as just another part of life, some viewed death as a doorway to another realm, and some believed in reincarnation, while some had no particular beliefs about life after death. Samantha said that she believes in “Summerland” and “reincarnation” and that “death is just another adventure”, Amber declared that she believes in “reincarnation” and “karma from actions in this life” that “affects the next life”, and John said that “there is some part of every living thing that moves on after they’re gone” and “the way you live life determines the kind of afterlife”, but “I don’t presume to know what it is”. Nicole noted that after death, there is “a waiting period” before you “go on to another life” that has “recurring themes and people”, and “once you deal with a particular theme, then it disappears”.

Spiritual or mystical experiences. Finally, all but one of our participants described having had some sort of spiritual or mystical experience involving visions, direct communication with deities, feeling the presence of the divine, or a gut feeling that something remarkable was occurring. Some described everyday experiences as being spiritual or mystical. John said that he has “encountered entities from another time and place”, Samantha described playing drums at a bonfire as a mystical experience when she “felt exhilarated, like a skydive”, and Jonathan said that he has “visions... while meditating”. Jack described “appreciation of great art... forests... music... being on top of a mountain” as spiritual experiences.

Character Traits of Pagans

In addition to the trends that emerged in their beliefs and practices, seven general character traits emerged that seem to be common to many of the Pagans we interviewed: open-mindedness, individualism, multiculturalism, experientialism, feminism, sex, and sexuality. All of our participants described most (but not all) Pagans as open-minded. Nicole said that Paganism has “made me more... open-minded”, and Amber said that it is “hard for me to make friends that aren’t open-minded”. Many participants emphasized individualism and solitary practice, describing individual or solitary rituals like “study” (Doug), “meditation” (John), “sitting outside” alone (Joe), and doing things “on my own... sitting down and paying respect to things in nature” (Nicole). Nearly all participants described or inferred a respect for multiculturalism and a fundamental respect for people from different cultures; Nicole noted that “Paganism is respectful of... others,” and Joe specifically noted that he was drawn to Paganism because it “accepted everyone”. Most participants emphasized the importance of experiential knowledge and personal experience to their beliefs. Doug noted that he was “drawn to Paganism because of the emphasis on a personal relationship with and search for deity”, and Laura described her own “personal honor code” that is based in the Pagan tradition of Asatru. All emphasized the valued place of women, feminism, and the feminine divine in Paganism. Samantha noted the connection of Paganism to

⁵⁸ Adler, *Drawing*, 8.

“feminist... movements”, and Amy noted how “Paganism emphasizes positive aspects of... femininity”. Most participants had liberal attitudes towards sex and valued egalitarian, respectful, and consensual sexual relationships. Samantha observed that “Pagans in general tend to be more sexually open”, Jonathan noted that “sex is to be cherished” in Paganism, and Amy said that Paganism “celebrates sex as part of religion”. Most participants also pointed out that Paganism is friendly and accepting to all sexualities. John observed that Paganism allowed him to “express more openly my views on sexuality”, and Joe said he was attracted to Paganism because “it was gay-friendly”. These character traits are highly speculative at best, as they are based on a small sample of participants, and at worst they run the risk of being no more than stereotypes. Nonetheless, among the specific participants we interviewed, these character traits emerged as a consistent theme.

Stereotypes of Pagans

Our participants noted that there are many stereotypes of Pagans, and that Paganism is a highly stigmatized set of religions. They mentioned many Pagan stereotypes, both from non-Pagan perspectives and from other Pagans, but most fell into seven categories: evil Pagans, teenaged Goth chicks, witches, New Age Hippies, just a phase, sex-crazed perverts, and within-Pagan stereotypes.

Stereotype 1: Evil Pagans. First, there is a stereotype that Pagans are evil, practice witchcraft, or worship Satan. Participants noted that this stereotype includes views like Pagans “worship... something bad”, “worship demons” (Doug), are “evil, hate Christians, and put spells on people” (Nicole), are “evil, Satanic”, or “going to steal your soul” (Joe), “make animal sacrifices” (Nicole again), “sacrifice people” (Jonathan), “eat babies for breakfast” (Samantha), are “going to hell” (Amber), or “they’re the people your mother warned you about” (Samantha again). In fact, Pagans value good works, do not believe in animal sacrifice, never sacrifice human beings, and do not worship Satan.⁵⁹

Stereotype 2: Teenaged Goth chicks. Second, a stereotype exists that Pagans are all teenaged Goth chicks – young, female, and preferring to dress in dark clothing. Participants noted that people sometimes expect Pagans to be “Goth or black” (Joe) or “dress all in black” and “shop at Hot Topic” (Amy). In fact, 40% of all Pagans are men, there are many middle-aged and older Pagans, and there are Pagan couples, families, and Pagan children raised by Pagan parents (including the second author).⁶⁰

Stereotype 3: Witches. Third, there is the stereotype that Pagans are all witches – green-skinned, broom-riding witches. Two participants noted that many people think Pagans – especially Wiccan Pagans – “fly on brooms, stand over cauldrons, cackle, [and] have black cats” (Amber) or “have a black cat and a cauldron” (Amy). These are stereotypes from literature and film, and while Wicca is a kind of Paganism, there are many Pagans who are not Wiccan and who do not practice Magic.⁶¹ Participants made statements like “not all Pagans are Wiccan, but all Wiccans are Pagan” (Amber) and “a witch is one who practices Magic” while “a Pagan is more general” and about “worshipping deities” (Samantha).

Stereotype 4: New Age Hippies. Fourth, a stereotype exists that Pagans are New Age Hippies – Hippies or children of Hippies, tree-huggers, or vegetarians into a religious “fad”. Interviewees mentioned stereotypes like Pagans as “crystal-hugging New-Agers” (Laura), “filthy Hippies”, “tree-huggers”, “children of Hippies”, or “environmentalists” (Samantha). While some Pagans do fit these descriptions, Pagans come from many different walks of life, and Paganism is a small but growing group of religious movements that have become well-established in the United States and the United Kingdom.⁶²

Stereotype 5: Just a Phase. Fifth, there is a stereotype that Paganism is “just a phase” that teenagers go through to act out when they are “going through a religious phase” (John), “just casual shopping” for religion, or “being told they don’t really believe” (Jack). While some people do experiment with Paganism

⁵⁹ Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1-247.

⁶⁰ Berger et al, 2003; Kermani, “Don’t Eat”, 181-196.

⁶¹ Fox, *Introduction*, n.p.

⁶² Berger et al., *Voices*, 1-232.

and then move on to another faith, Paganism is a set of religions each with its own set of beliefs and practices that represent a lifelong conviction for many people.⁶³

Stereotype 6: Sex-crazed perverts. Sixth, a stereotype exists that Pagans are sex-crazed perverts (or use witchcraft to bewitch their lovers). Participants noted that people sometimes think Pagans are “sexually active”, “sexually open” (Samantha), “sexually promiscuous”, “having gay sex”, “perverted” (Jonathan), or “anything goes” in bed (Samantha again). In fact, Pagans have progressive views towards both sex and sexuality but have rules of sexual behavior that generally prohibit using Magic to make others do things against their will.⁶⁴

Within-Pagan stereotypes. Finally, Pagans also hold stereotypes about other Pagans, including the ideas that (a) “Crystal hugger” or “fluffy bunny” Pagans are overly enthusiastic about being Pagan, (b) all Pagans are alike (or should be), (c) Pagan traditions have always had their current characteristics, (d) every Pagan tradition has been strongly influenced by one particular aspect of Paganism (e.g., Gerald Gardner, Wicca, or the ancient Greeks), (e) Eastern religion is good, and (f) organized religions (especially western religions like Christianity) are bad. Our interviewees reported that within-Pagan stereotypes include “in-grouping”, “cliques”, “people who believe everything is Wiccan or influenced by the Celts”, “people who want to assimilate you”, “people who believe that every ancient Pagan religion has always had these characteristics”, “Christian-hating”, “bitter”, or “people following a secret Eastern religion that they don’t want to tell others about” (John and Amy).

Dealing with stereotypes. As a consequence of these stereotypes, Pagans are frequently stigmatized and are fearful of being discriminated against because of their beliefs. Although most of our participants had not been directly discriminated against, all knew of others who had faced stigmatization because of their religious identification. Amber lamented that “Christians often quote scripture to me” and “try to convert me” but “don’t want to listen to my beliefs”. Participants stated that many stereotypes are generally just rumors from movies. They reported that they deal with these stereotypes in different ways, by “recognizing them as stereotypes” (Doug), “go[ing] with the flow” (John), being “a public figure” who is “out there” as a Pagan (Joe), and explaining “what it [Paganism] really is to more reasonable, open people” (Nicole). Some participants noted that they use humor, telling jokes like, “No, I don’t have a cat, I’m allergic” (Amber) or “I celebrate holidays... naked” (John, who did not celebrate holidays naked). Joe noted that being Pagan has taught him “to embrace who I am”.

Pagan Attitudes About Mental Health and Psychotherapy

We specifically asked the Pagans we interviewed for their perspectives on counseling and what they thought professional counselors should know about providing culturally sensitive services to Pagan clients. They made the following observations:

- Paganism is “so diverse in its opinions and beliefs that very rarely” will you find points that they agree on; “the person who practices defines what they believe” (Doug).
- Do “not assume you know about it already”. Know the basic “deities”, “ideas”, “tenets”, and “ethics” of the Pagan religions, but do not assume that all Pagans believe or practice the same thing (John).
- A counselor “should be open-minded” and “know something about the broad classes of Paganism” such as Wicca and Reconstructionism (Samantha).
- Pagans are “no different from everyone else” (Joe).
- “Be open-minded” and “don’t discriminate” or “give off those kind of vibes” – come across as comfortable talking about Paganism (Amber).
- Approach Pagans with “no assumptions whatsoever... The word Pagan tells you they’re not conventional Christian, but it’s not going to tell you much beyond that” (Jonathan).
- “Not all Pagans are the same – they vary widely... Begin with me, and [do] not hold ironclad anything you’ve heard” about other Pagans. “Be prepared to hear things” that might sound “odd”, “weird”, “crazy”, “unusual”, or “like really good ideas I’ve never thought of before” (Amy).

⁶³ Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1-247.

⁶⁴ Carpenter, *Spiritual Experiences*, 1-247; Warwick, “Feminist Wicca”, 121-133.

- Paganism is the same as any other religion – a “deep-seated religious belief” to be respected (Laura).
- Instead of prescribing medicine, “use holistic treatments” and “alternative methods” like “meditation” (Joe).

Most of the Pagans we interviewed said they would prefer not to seek counseling themselves, or would only do so as a last resort. They indicated that if they were to seek counseling they would be willing to discuss their religious beliefs, but only if their counselor brought up the topic first. The interviewees who had been to counseling previously indicated they went for reasons which were mostly unrelated to their religion. Some reported positive experiences like having an understanding and nonjudgmental counselor, while others reported negative experiences like having their confidentiality breached, being asked to take medication, or receiving a psychological evaluation in school because someone had called her a witch. Nicole even asked us, “Can you convince my counselors at the counseling center that I’m not crazy?” Most participants indicated they would rather talk to friends, especially someone else who identified as Pagan.

Pagan Identity Development

Most of the participants who were interviewed described a gradual process of change they went through in becoming Pagan. This process may have been idiosyncratic to our particular sample, but based on our interviews, it appears that some Pagans – particularly Pagans who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered – appear to go through a process of religious identity development which is similar to the sexual identity development process of many people who are GLBT⁶⁵ and reminiscent of Andrew Yip’s research on sexuality and religious identity⁶⁶ and Jone Salomonsen’s work on gender and sacred hermeneutics.⁶⁷ This process of Pagan identity development is outlined in Figure 1.

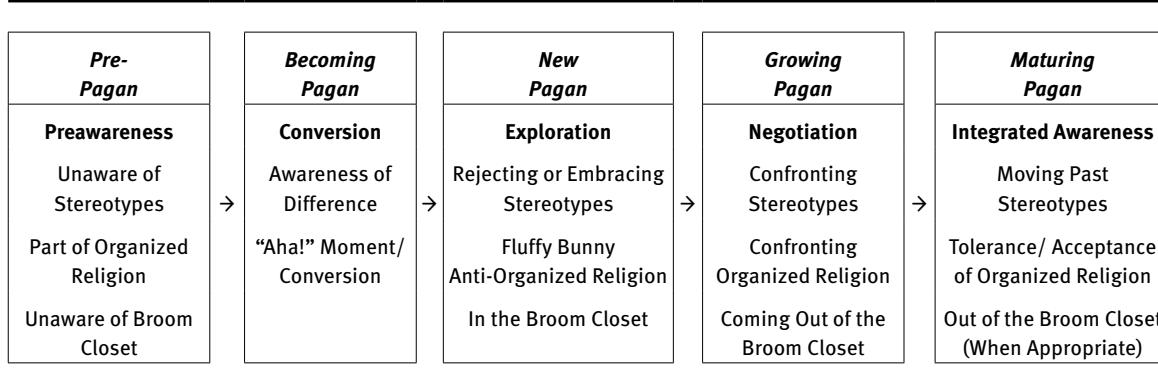


Figure 1. Pagan Identity Development. This figure outlines the identity development process that many Pagans go through.

Most of our participants described a *Pre-Pagan – Preawareness* phase of their lives when they felt their beliefs were different from other people’s but did not know anything about Paganism. Gradually, this gave way to a *Becoming Pagan – Conversion* phase when they learned about Paganism and discovered that this religious tradition felt right to them or fit with how they saw the world. This in turn led to a *New Pagan – Exploration* phase when they eagerly explored Paganism and naively viewed all things Pagan as good. (Pagans often call this “fluffy bunny” Paganism.) They frequently viewed organized religion as bad and described themselves as being “in the broom closet” – identifying as Pagan but not yet willing to admit this publicly. In time, their faith developed further into a *Growing Pagan – Negotiation* phase in which they developed more realistic

⁶⁵ C.f., McCarn and Fassinger, “Revisioning”, 1996, for a review.

⁶⁶ C.f., Yip, “Persistence”, 199-212; Yip, “Researching Lesbian”, 2; Yip, “Spirituality”, 137-154; Yip and Page, “Religious faith”, 78-108.

⁶⁷ Salomonsen, *Enchanted*, 1318.

perspectives on Paganism, learned to negotiate stereotyping and stigmatization, and often came “out of the broom closet”, disclosing their Pagan religious identity to family, friends, and coworkers. Some described being supported in their religious beliefs, while others described having relatives argue with, threaten, or try to convert them. For some participants, this phase eventually gave way to a *Maturing Pagan – Integrated Awareness* phase when they learn to balance and be comfortable with both their own Pagan beliefs and values and the non-Pagan beliefs of most of the world, moving past the many stereotypes associated with Paganism while respecting the beliefs of others who are not Pagan. They integrate their religious identity into their personality, making it an important part of who they are without making it their defining characteristic. Additionally, many of our participants described a dual identity development process, dealing with sexual identity issues as well as religious identity issues. They noted that “coming out of the broom closet” for Pagans was a similar process to “coming out of the closet” for people who identify as GLBT, as both are stigmatized and involve significant shifts in identity. They also felt that coming out once made it easier to come out again – that people with nontraditional sexual identities might be more likely to also question their traditional religious beliefs. It is important to note, though, that of the ten participants in the current study, seven identified as GLBT, so their non-traditional sexuality may have interacted with their non-traditional religiousness to result in an identity development process which is not typical of all Pagans.

Recommendations for Counselors and Psychotherapists

Assessment and diagnostic issues. When taken out of context, much of Paganism can look abnormal to a counselor who is uninformed about Pagan beliefs and practices. The Magical thinking, animism, and seeing and hearing things that are not there that are normal for many Pagans may be incorrectly interpreted as pathological, but they should not be viewed as signs of mental illness in the absence of other signs of psychopathology.

Client/counselor relationship. Establishing strong therapeutic alliances when counseling Pagan clients is particularly important. Many Pagans express distrust of non-Pagans they do not know and of counseling itself, and many believe that counselors would have difficulty understanding their beliefs – or interpret them as pathological. Even when counselors do not assume that clients are from Judeo-Christian-Islamic backgrounds, Pagan clients may assume that counselors will do so. Some of our participants indicated that they might share some inconsequential piece of information and then wait to see how their counselor reacts before deciding to disclose their Pagan beliefs. Consequently, counselors should project an open-minded, nonjudgmental, accepting attitude.

Sense of humor. Many Pagans have a good sense of humor and have learned to deal with stigmatization by laughing at themselves and their strange beliefs and practices. Counselors can use humor as a source of resilience, strength, and stress relief when building a working alliance with clients who identify as Pagan.

Autonomy and personal responsibility. Counselors should reinforce the individualism, autonomy, and personal responsibility of Pagan clients. While these characteristics make some Pagans less receptive to counseling, counselors who acknowledge the value of these traits will encourage Pagan clients to make use of counseling.

Stigmatization, suspiciousness, and isolation. Paganism is stigmatizing. Counselors should recognize that a certain amount of suspiciousness and isolation is normal for many Pagans, so they can distinguish between healthy suspiciousness and unhealthy paranoia, and between solitary living and loneliness, as the latter traits may require therapeutic intervention.

Relationships. Pagans often experience relationship problems, as family members are not always understanding or supportive of their religious beliefs. Even when family members are supportive, Pagans usually have religious beliefs that differ from their families’ beliefs. Consequently, Pagan clients often bring relationship issues to counseling.

Gender, sex, and sexuality. Pagans tend to have progressive views towards gender, sex, and sexuality. Counselors can reinforce these values to support a client’s positive self-image, build self-esteem, create egalitarian relationships, empower both women and men, and work through relationship problems.

Identity issues. It is important to understand the process of identity development and “coming out of the broom closet” that many Pagans undergo. It is a traumatic and painful experience, and for many people it is associated with depression, anxiety, and family conflict. Furthermore, up to half of all Pagans also experience sexual identity issues. Yet many Pagans are unaware they are experiencing identity conflicts. Consequently, counseling can serve as an important source of support for Pagan clients who experience identity issues.

Ethical issues. Counselors are usually trained to address many different mental health, sexuality, and identity issues – issues that religious professionals are often not trained to address. While religious issues fall outside the bounds of a counselor’s competence and are best left up to religious professionals to address, spiritual issues involve existential issues like identity and meaning which counselors are trained to address. In fact, secular counseling may be more appropriate than religious counseling for treating these issues – and is clearly more appropriate for treating mental health issues. Consequently, when Pagan clients are in distress, counselors arguably have an ethical obligation to address their spiritual issues.

Pagans as healers. Pagans often employ non-traditional means to heal themselves physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually – methods which counselors can use in counseling, either to build rapport or as part of culturally-sensitive treatment interventions. The people we interviewed mentioned eight Pagan healing techniques that may be helpful in counseling: herbal remedies, personal affirmations, stone healing, meditation, energy manipulation, touch, magic, and ritual. Pagans frequently use herbal remedies (like teas or herbal baths) or stone healing (carrying or wearing stones) to promote health and prefer these to taking medications for minor health problems. Personal affirmations and meditation are both counseling practices that Pagans sometimes use in their daily lives. Pagans commonly believe that they can sense and use life-force energies in themselves, others, and nature; many use chakras or Reiki to focus on healing different areas of the body or mind. Many Pagans also heal by using touch such as massage. Even a reassuring touch on the hand from a caring counselor can go a long way. Pagans often use Magic to aid in healing; for example a client might use a stone to symbolize emotional pain and burn it with a fire which symbolizes healing. Finally, Pagans often perform certain rituals which are meaningful to them. Rituals can be powerful ways of focusing on a problem or searching for a solution, and many are associated with a release of emotion, but nearly all rituals give the performer a feeling of greater control over their lives. By supporting these methods or even incorporating some of them into counseling, counselors can better provide culturally-sensitive treatment to Pagan clients.

Conclusions

The current study has some notable limitations. The conclusions from this study are based on a sample of Pagans which was small, age-limited, geographically limited, and comprised mostly of GLBT individuals. Although we attempted to offset this somewhat by reviewing the international literature on Paganism, the generalizability of our conclusions may be limited, and our sample may not be representative of Pagans nationwide. For instance, approximately half of the Pagans in the United States are Wiccan,⁶⁸ while only one of our participants was. Also, it is again important to note that of the ten participants in the current study, seven identified as GLBT, so their non-traditional sexuality may have interacted with their non-traditional religiousness to result in an identity development process which is not typical of all Pagans. Unlike most qualitative research, though, one of our ultimate goals was to develop a clinical resource which can be used in counseling with Pagan clients across the United States. Future research should therefore focus on the generalizability and applicability of the assertions presented here, to verify their utility and veracity nation-wide.

One of the strengths of the methodology used in this study is the ability to describe the religion(s) of Paganism both from the perspective of a dispassionate observer as well as in the words of Pagan adherents. Merging etic and emic approaches to knowledge creation in this way gave us a body of information that was

⁶⁸ Moe et al., “Wicca”, 38-48.

not only varied and informative but also deep and rich in detail. The observations we present may not be applicable to all Pagans, but they provide a useful window into the worldviews of Pagan college students in the United States – particularly GLBT Pagans.

In summation, Pagan clients have much in common with each other. They all follow one of a collection of earth-based, nature-oriented polytheistic religions, and they often have certain beliefs and issues that are unique to this faith. Some also go through a specific religious identity development process in becoming Pagan. On the other hand, they also have at least as much in common with non-Pagan clients who present to counseling in their need for services and in the presenting problems that bring them to counseling in the first place. As two of our participants noted, “Pagans have the same kind of problems as everybody else” (Amber), and “A counselor can help me as easily as anyone else... if you know how to approach me” (Joe). Thus there is a need to provide Pagan clients with culturally-sensitive therapy.

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