

Running Head: NEO-PAGAN AND WICCAN CLIENTS

Title: Understanding and Counseling Neo-Pagan and Wiccan Clients

(Alternative Title: What is... Neo-Paganism?)

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What are Neo-Paganism and Wicca?

Neo-Paganism refers to a group of Eurocentric religions that focus on reviving the pre-Christian practices of Europe and/or developing new and borrowed practices compatible with ancient pagan worldviews. These religions include the many Traditions of Wicca (the largest religion in the cluster), British Traditional Witches, Asatru (the worship of ancient Norse and Germanic deities), Hellenismos (the worship of Greek gods), Druids, and many others.

Aboriginal faiths, Santeria, Voodoo, major non-Abrahamic faiths from Asia, and other scripture-based religions are not included. Satanism is also not included as it is viewed by most Neo-Pagans as an antithetical perversion of Christianity having nothing to do with either ancient or contemporary Pagan belief or practice.

Interest in European Pagan religions began to revive in the 1930s to 60s. These revivals can be seen as either the public reemergence of hidden ancient sects or the modern recreation of practices from scraps of records and myth that survived destruction during the Christianization of Europe. Regardless, Pagan religions today incorporate both ancient pre-Christian European beliefs as well as newly invented procedures. Many followers of these Eurocentric religions borrow practices from around the world, while retaining distinctly Pagan identity and worship patterns. Neo-Pagans are distinct from the New Age movement, although many practices and tools (crystals, astrology, etc.) are shared between the two.

Beliefs vary widely but in general include: (1) immanence of deity and the interconnectedness of life; (2) a predominant focus on the here-and-now rather than the after-life; (3) the earth is considered sacred, not a trial, punishment, or exile from the Divine; (4) a religious interest in and rites to acknowledge the seasons of the year, and other sacred natural

processes such as birth, growth, dying, and fertility; (5) exploration of ancient wisdom for its relevance to the modern world; (6) direct personal deity contact with little to no church hierarchy; (7) personal responsibility for spiritual growth and mundane world affairs; (8) the extensive use of tools and props in religious ritual; (9) subdivision of the Divine into components for easier understanding and more personal relationship (gods and goddesses, nature spirits, ancestor spirits, elemental forces, etc.); (10) a belief in magic, which may be best thought of as prayer that is enhanced through the use of tools and rituals; and (11) a “harm none” philosophy (especially in Wicca), and strong ethical code in all cases. According to Kennedy (2003), Neo-Pagan characteristics also include a lack of universally recognized scripture or institutions, a quest to develop the self, the permutation of spirituality throughout all of one's life, and an acceptance of diversity.

Wiccan Traditions are often duo-theistic, worshipping the Lord and Lady. Some feel that all of the various gods and goddesses are alternative names for the Lady and the Lord, while others are “hard polytheists” who work with a pantheon of discretely separate deities. Some groups place a stronger focus on the Goddess in their workings. Many Pagans believe in inherent divinity, that we are perfect and divine, only needing to grow into our full expression. The ideas of reincarnation and the earth as a training school for evolving souls are prevalent.

Some people are “generically” Pagan. That is, they are not members of a particular Pagan religion (like Wicca), but rather are solitary practitioners. This is made easier by the common community that this cluster of religions hold in common. Pagan festivals and conferences typically invite all Pagans to play, learn, and worship together.

Pagan interests are many and varied, and reading other chapters in this book will likely help you prepare to counsel Pagans. Pagans are known to utilize techniques and concepts such

as the dark night of the soul, meditation, guided journeys, labyrinths, sweats, reiki, shamanic journeying and healing, chanting, and self-hypnosis. They are also generally interested in divination (like Tarot cards and runes), herbalism, auras, qabala/kabbalah, and all manner of occult subjects.

Well-known, early 20th-century occultist Dion Fortune (otherwise known as psychotherapist Violet Firth) defined magic as “the art of bringing about change in consciousness in conformity with the will” (Butler, 1952). It may be best to leave it ambiguous as to whether or not Pagans are changing their own mental states or the world around them with magic. The overlap between magic, psychotherapeutic techniques, and self-hypnosis is considerable. Not all Pagans use magic – Wiccans almost always do. Usually the intended effects of such are akin to what prayer is used for – healing, good fortune, guidance requests, and the like. No one is flying on broomsticks or turning into toads. In order to better focus the will and mind, tools like wands, stones, and robes are utilized. Successful magic is thought to have energy behind it, and so chanting and dancing may be used to whip-up energy. As people themselves are a part of the Divine, magic may be accomplished through their own power as well as by requesting the aid of the gods.

Demographics

Reliable statistics and demographics are hard to estimate due to reluctance to come forward for fear of persecution, solitary followers unaffiliated with known groups, and Pagans identifying themselves as “no religion”, Unitarian Universalist, or New Age on surveys.

Estimates in the United States have the Neo-Pagan population placed at between 200,000 and 1,000,000 (The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, 2007). Adherents.com (2005), drawing upon American Religious Identity Survey (ARIS) 2001 survey data, places

“Wiccan/Pagan/Druid” as the 10th largest religious group in the United States with a 2004 estimated population of 433,267 people. *Religioustolerance.org* (2007), drawing on the same ARIS 2001 data, reports Wiccans to be doubling in the USA every 30 months. Surveys out of Scotland have the adherents of Neo-Paganism doubling every single year (McKinnon, 2003). Australian statistics claim a 373.5% increase in Wiccans between 1996 and 2001, and 24,000+ people adhering to nature-based religions (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2003). Regardless of the truth of these claims, the population can certainly be said to be exploding.

The best survey research data available (Berger, Leach, & Shaffer, 2003) consisting of a nation-wide sample of 2,089 people across the USA, has the Pagan population as 90.8% White, 64.8% female, 52.9% with at least a college degree or better, 87.9% between the ages of 20 and 49, and 28.3% homosexual or bisexual. There are also high rates of acceptance and/or practice of group marriages, cohabitation, and ritual but not legal marriages (called handfastings). Neo-Pagans are active politically and tend strongly towards liberal and democratic parties (only 6.6% are Republicans), and strongly support environmental concerns.

Neo-Pagans generally look like anyone else. There may occasionally be a tendency towards fantasy symbols (like dragons & fairies) on clothing. Some may sport symbols such as a pentacles, goddess symbols, triple moons, and spirals on jewelry or tattoos. Crocker (2005) cautions that not all people wearing pentacles are Neo-Pagan – some wear them for shock effect or other reasons.

Counselor Attitudes and Spirituality versus Psychosis

Pagan clients often do not tell their therapists about their religion for fear of being thought crazy. In my practice, I had one client quit her former psychiatrist and therapist after he increased her anti-psychotic medications without discussion once she made mention of talking

with her goddesses. Our dialogue on this topic quickly revealed her deity contacts to be sources of comfort and strength that in no way damaged her abilities to hold a job, maintain friendships, or otherwise engage mundane reality.

The fifth spiritual counseling competency outlined by Miller (1995) and widely adopted by ASERVIC states that “the professional counselor can demonstrate sensitivity and acceptance of a variety of religious and/or spiritual expressions in client communication.” Even so, many counselors are going to be hard-pressed to live up to ideals when clients mention that the goddess Hecate visited in a dream, that they regularly see the dead, that they danced around a fire at full moon last night, or that they decided how to handle a problem through divination. It is routine in these religions to utilize shamanic practices, divination, and to talk to spirits. Before labeling them a mental problem, careful work needs to be done to make sure such contacts are actually harming the client, causing them to lose connection with reality, and are outside the Pagan norm.

This discussion of the paranormal quickly leads counselors into the need for an intense reevaluation of what they consider healthy versus psychotic. I would urge understanding of Pagan religious and cultural norms as well as common sense considerations. Does it bother, hurt, or move the client away from health? Does it interfere with work or everyday living? Can the client put it aside, or tell it to go away for a while? Can the client focus on mundane life when needed? Will the client listen to trusted people to tell him when it’s interfering with life and social connections? Is the client unduly rigid and inflexible in religious matters? Does it assist the client’s functioning in some way and/or bring peace and joy?

Counselors considering the value of unusual perceptions of reality may also wish to look towards the plethora of literature discussing overlaps in technique between shamanism, magic,

and psychotherapy, such as in Jerome Frank's classic *Persuasion and Healing: A Comparative Study of Psychotherapy*.

Counselors may also need to develop openness to the idea that ritual possession is, for many Neo-Pagans, a positive thing, and does not vary greatly from many Pentecostal Christian practices. Clergy leading ceremonies are sometimes considered possessed by gods or goddesses during portions of the event. Neo-Pagans trained to open themselves to divine possession have generally practiced meditative trance states combined with pictorial and verbal key sequences to allow the change to take place. Generally they are forbidden from describing the procedure. Appropriate behavior during and timing of possession states (according to the norms of the group) may help indicate whether or not these are healthy or indicative of mental illness.

For more extreme situations where the client seems to be having a psychotic break, counselors are recommended to look at works discussing the differences between straight psychosis versus spiritual emergencies and peak experiences. Sperry (2001) outlines how theorists differentiate spiritual emergencies and peak experiences from "regular" psychosis: (a) a change in consciousness involving significant transpersonal emphasis, individual views it as an inner psychological process, and capacity to form a therapeutic alliance (Grof & Grof, 1989); (b) an ecstatic mood, sense of newly gained knowledge, delusions have mythological themes, and no concept disorganization (Lukoff, 1985); and (c) responses to voices and visions are in the direction of healthier self-understanding, better relations, or constructive action, rather than self-oriented, paranoid, and idiosyncratic (Barnhouse, 1986). The implication is that there may be something useful about spiritual emergencies in a religious person's development.

How do Pagan beliefs impact counseling?

Pending significant research, common sense and personal experience have to suffice. That said, the beliefs of these groups matter in counseling and can be used to great effect.

The concept of personal responsibility is central in most forms of Paganism. Wiccans handle religious matters personally, pursuing direct contact with the Divine and often acting as their own priest or priestess. This religious stance can be used to empower clients towards internal locus of control and taking responsibility for their lives. Internal locus of control (the client believes that events in life are under the clients' own control not outside forces) has been shown to relate significantly to better coping skills (Pargament et al., 1988, as cited in Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2004). In a similar vein, the concept of inherent divinity should be useful with clients suffering low self-esteem or feelings of worthlessness.

Personal connection to the Divine is critical in Paganism. In some cases the type of gods being worked with can be adjusted to help the client. An artist might look to Bridget (Irish goddess of healing, inspiration, and smith craft) for inspiration. A client with social skills deficits might work with Oghma (Irish god of eloquence) or Aphrodite (Greek love goddess). The nurturing, mothering aspects of goddesses (or the Wiccan Goddess) can be emphasized for clients needing healing and love. Their myths can be looked to for inspiration and ideas to emulate. Therapists could look to Jungian and archetypal psychology for how gods might be worked with therapeutically. Some clients will be amenable to the idea that gods are alive and formational in the make-up of the human unconscious and personality (like Jungian archetypes).

Books such as *SoulCollage: An Intuitive Collage Process for Individuals and Groups* by Seena Frost, or *Devoted to You: Honoring Deity in Wiccan Practice* by New Jersey ASERVIC president Judy Harrow can also help. In Frost's book, the client develops collage pictures representing different pieces of themselves ("adult", "warrior" etc.) and does exercises and

meditations with them to get to know themselves better. Very similar work could be done as to which deities the client thinks she is most similar to or comprised of, and the nature of the personal relationship with each deity. Harrow's book outlines ways to set-up altars, collect myths, run rituals, and generally grow closer to various deities.

Pagan rituals and spiritual practices are full of meditation, guided imagery, affirmations, relaxation exercises, and other practices that can be pulled into therapy for fast effect. Pagan clients usually carry with them a well-developed arsenal of practices which most therapists don't know they have and that can be re-activated for great effect. Many of these clients only use these skills in certain religious and spiritual contexts and don't realize that broader use of them could effect mental health benefits. Therapists who have studied hypnosis will see huge overlaps between many Neo-Pagan spiritual and meditative techniques and their hypnotherapy training.

For example, a "ground and center" exercise is typically used right before a Wiccan ritual. That exercise is virtually identical to standard relaxation visualization and breathing techniques. A Wiccan with an anxiety disorder could be instructed to utilize the exercise they already know and believe in twice per day for great relaxation benefit.

Crocker (2005) outlines many ways in which a client's Paganism might impact the issues she brings to the counseling session. Occasional festivals instead of regular congregational involvement or sparse Pagan populations in some areas may lead to feelings of isolation. The client may be questioning the reality of shamanic experiences encountered such as hearing voices or seeing visions because of the disbelief of these experiences encountered in the larger society. Due to higher percentage of women, lesbians, and gays, counselors may see more conscious, personal grappling with issues of sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation. Pagans often struggle with the impact of telling others about their religion (coming out of the "broom

closet”), which can impact jobs, relationships, and child custody. Symptoms of trauma may be more prevalent, owing to the lack of acceptance or the outright hostility shown by family and prior religious institutions. Confidentiality issues may surface in therapy due to many Pagans being forbidden by oath from discussing certain aspects of their training or rituals.

Crocker also suggests strengths that can be capitalized upon including existing familiarity with Jungian psychology, high educational level, strong social support from small ritual groups, the psychotherapeutic value of Pagan rituals, Pagan leadership training in helping professions, and generally high sense of personal responsibility.

Need for Research

Research studies of counseling effectiveness with Neo-Pagan religious groups are few to almost nonexistent. Research with Neo-Pagan populations is important for at least three reasons -- their rapidly exploding population, research with other religious groups indicating that religious affiliation effects counseling, and Neo-Pagan attitudes and beliefs that seem more in line with magical religions like Santeria than mainstream Western thinking (and that might again effect counseling outcomes).

Preliminary research regarding clients from traditional Western religious backgrounds (Christian and Jewish) seems to indicate that many such clients prefer counselors of similar faith backgrounds and do better when elements of faith practice are introduced into counseling or provided as an adjunct to secular counseling (Keating & Fretz, 1990; Propst et al., 1992; Worthington, Kurusu, McCullough, & Sandage, 1996).

Academic publications regarding Santeria and Native American spirituality point out at least tentatively that practitioners of these naturalistic magical religions distrust Western medicine, tend to attribute psychological (and physical) illness to magical causes, and often

require coordination with traditional faith healers (Dana, 2000; Santi, 1997; Sue, 1999). These traits have important implications for treatment as distinct from mainstream Western clients. Neo-Pagans, however, hail almost exclusively from white European descended populations in Western nations, and converted from mainstream backgrounds. This suggests a question as to how to treat them in counseling situations. Will Neo-Pagans exhibit responses to counseling more in keeping with their Western roots, or their nature-oriented, magical religion?

With population figures rapidly rising, its time to start taking Neo-Pagans seriously and engage in research to answer these and other questions.

Suggested Resources

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Online resources

Covenant of the Goddess (CoG): <http://www.cog.org>

A guide for hospital chaplains and other health care providers: <http://www.washington-baltimore-paganclergy.org/archives/hospital-chaplaincy-education-slideshow/>

The Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids: <http://www.druidry.org/>

Proteus Coven Library: <http://www.draknet.com/proteus/library.htm>

Raven Kindred (Asatru): <http://www.ravenkindred.com>

The Shadow of Olympus (Hellenismos): <http://www.iskios.com>

The Witches' Voice: <http://www.witchvox.com/basics/wfaq.html>

A few good basic books

Amber K. (1997). *True magick: a beginner's guide*. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications.

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