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Witches Ways of Knowing: The Adult Learning Process in Joining Social Groups

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Abstract: This study explored what motivates adults to engage in learning that leads to membership in a marginalized social group and the nature of their learning process. By interviewing a sample of Wiccans, we discovered an intense internal motivation that endures over years and an integrated, holistic learning process.

Introduction

For nearly eight decades, adult education scholars and researchers in related fields have studied the process of adult learning (Kidd 1973; Merriam 1993; & Thorndike, Bregman, Tilton, and Woodyard 1928). Although no single, encompassing theory of adult learning has emerged during this time, investigations on the subject have been prolific (Merriam & Caffarella 1999). Scholars have examined adult learning resulting from formal and informal experiences, such as self-directed learning (Tough, 1971; see also Merriam, 1993; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; & Merriam, 2001 for recent reviews of subsequent research on self-directed learning) and experiential learning to build an adult learning theory (Boud, Keogh, & Walker 1985; Boud, Cohen, & Walker 1993; & Fenwick, 2000).

Learning and groups is yet another thread of research on adult learning, especially in the human resource and organizational development area. However, in that literature the focus is not on the individual learner but the learning processes of the group (Kasl, Marsick, & Dechant, 1997). We wondered not about group learning, but about the process of learning to be a member of a group, especially a marginalized or stigmatized group which, by its very nature, is less visible and less accessible than a mainstream group. That is, mainstream social, civic, and religiously affiliated groups are visible, easily accessed, often soliciting membership, and have well-established mechanisms for incorporating new members. It is far less clear how individuals gain access and learn the values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of a group that exists on the margins of society, unacknowledged, stigmatized, and sometimes harassed and oppressed. An investigation into literature sources that would inform our curiosity revealed several studies that examined learning in marginalized groups, but the learning in those studies was what transpired after the participants joined a group (Bohlen, 1999; King, 1988; & Peplon, 1999).

Thus, we pursued the study reported here; its purpose was to explore the nature of the learning process when adults join a marginalized social group. The inquiry was guided by two research questions: What motivates adults to engage in learning that leads to membership in a marginalized social group? What is the learning process for adults who seek membership in a marginalized social group?

Methodology

A qualitative design was chosen because we sought to identify and understand a dynamic process. A nonrandom, purposeful sample of Wiccans was selected to be interviewed. Wiccans were chosen because we wanted to investigate the learning process in a voluntary, marginalized social

group. Although Wicca is a legally recognized religion and “appears to be the fastest-growing religion in America” (Allen, 2001, p. 1), its members remain reluctant to disclose their beliefs for fear of harassment and/or discrimination.

The final sample consisted of 20 adults, 8 men and 12 women ranging in age from 26 to 59. One person was in his 20’s. Ten were in their 30’s. Five people were 40 to 49 and four individuals were age 50 to 59. All are Caucasian. The length of time the person considered herself/himself a Wiccan ranged from 2 to 25 years. The time as a member of their current coven ranged from 1 year to 21 years. Two people indicated that although they were currently solitary practitioners, they had belonged to a group at one time. Level of education spanned from high school graduate to doctorate. Nineteen of the 20 participants attended college or beyond. Occupations included teacher, attorney, computer consultant, journalist, counselor, manager, carpenter, and homemaker. A semi-structured interview format was used. Our questions targeted how the person became a Wiccan and the learning that occurred during the process of becoming Wiccan.

Data were analyzed inductively using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). As the interviews were conducted and transcribed, each member of the team read, reread and coded the transcripts for key points and themes related to identity development and the learning process. Related themes were organized into categories which reflected the motivating factors and the learning process leading to membership in Wicca; both are explained in the next section of this article.

Findings

The data yielded an integrative process of learning that was initiated by a predisposition to Wiccanism. For most of the participants this inclination was realized in childhood experiences that reflected how different the participants were from other children. Other participants noted that their learning journey to Wicca began with the realization of a spiritual void that was not satisfied by conventional religious organizations; in some instances this feeling was recognized in childhood, in other cases during adolescence or adulthood. These two initial motivating factors led to an exploratory learning component characterized by self-directed activities such as reading and informal discussion. Most participants discovered Wicca in their exploratory activities and then decided to target their learning on Wiccanism. This component of the learning process involved periods of formal and informal study and participation in mentoring relationships. The evidence provided by the participants indicates that the nature of the process is a holistic, integrated approach.

Readiness: A Predisposition to Wicca

When asked to explain how they became a Wiccan, most participants described early childhood experiences that indicated a predisposition to Wiccanism. Other participants traced the origins of their learning to become Wicca to an empty spiritual life, especially evident in the number of unanswered questions they held about religion.

Early childhood experiences. The stories of our participants reveal childhood experiences that convinced the participants that they were different from other children. This finding is reflected in Moonshadow’s experience on a family vacation:

We were at Mammoth Cave in Kentucky...you are so far down underground this is what total darkness is. And they turn out the lights. They say you can’t even see your hand in front of your face. And I’m like, “I can see fine, I can see you and I can see you and I can see you”; and this hand clasps down on my shoulder and grabs me, which is, of course, “father speak” for “shut up, we’ll discuss this later.” And the discussion of that

was it will not be discussed. Don't let anybody know that you can see things differently from other folks.

Spiritual seeking. Whether it was in childhood or later, nearly all the participants confessed that they were motivated to look to Wicca by a dissatisfaction with conventional religion. Many, like Ziggy who had been raised in a "very strict Protestant family from my German background," felt their religion "wasn't complete; it wasn't complete for me." When asked to tell us what was motivating him toward Wicca, Ziggy answered: "The fact that I wasn't satisfied with what I had. I just didn't seem to get the inner feeling within myself that I was satisfying myself with this religion."

Exploratory Learning

In every instance the participants engaged in informal self-study about alternative religions. Although readings characterized this component, some participants used interactions with other people to supplement their reading.

After breaking ties with his conventional religious upbringing, Gwydion Mordraig, who admitted to being a "fairly bookish child . . . decided to go do research on my own. I went to the library and read everything I could find on every religion from A to Z, looking for one that would fit me."

Ramona actually worked at a library when she was 12 and admitted that "I stayed in the religion section, the psychology section, the philosophy section as much as possible," because that's where she found books about "psychic phenomenon." She taught herself to read fast and said that "I would read and take books home . . . and I did a lot of studying on my own." Her self-study continued into college, but it was later, when she met Lord Ziggy that she learned about Wicca.

Targeted Learning

Once the participants encountered Wicca their learning shifted to formal learning activities in which they began to study with others in classes. Additionally, they found or were assigned mentors who explained further the content of the classes and who answered their questions about Wicca. This component of the learning process led to membership in Wicca.

Formal study in classes. Although most of the participants attended classes about Wicca, about one-half of the sample were members of a coven that referred to itself as a Wicca seminary. With respect to these participants, each series of classes started with an introductory session which was one way for the participants to be sure they wanted to continue toward membership in Wicca. After the initial class, the series included 13 to 14 additional sessions that met once a month for about four to six hours. Each class covers a different subject; for example, the first is "Protocol" and the second is "Laws and Tenants." Nunnely Ar'mu's experience in these classes reflects their formal nature: "you go and it's academic, you're writing, it's lecture, it's not fun, it's like any other college, it's like college classes."

Not everyone in the "seminary" coven found the classes to be as sober as depicted by Nunnely Ar'mu. For example, Ramona describes how the classes enhanced her self-study: "And it was when I met Lady Sintana and I started going to the classes that—it was so compelling, it was so congealing. Everything was coming together. Everything became light ..."

One of the most important features of the classes, regardless of which coven is the sponsor, is the incorporation of experiential learning as an instructional method. Nearly every participant who engaged in classes pointed to the importance of practice in class sessions.

Minerva concluded that "the actual learning is in the doing and the experiencing as it is with being a mother and raising children. You can have a child in diapers and feed them and play with

them and everything, but in actual rearing of the child and the experiencing of being in their life and you being a part of their life, that's part of the learning process.”

Another essential feature of the formal learning experience is reflection. In fact participants are encouraged to use reflection to better understand their in-class practice activities. Ariell described her learning experience generally as an accumulation of knowledge that required periodic breaks with formal and informal study to reflect: “It’s hard to describe in words how this occurs. The best way I can describe—you guys are familiar with computers—at several points in my life I received a core download. Okay, and those years of reflection were basically sorting out files and I’m basically still doing that today.”

Mentoring relationships. Formal study in classes is complemented by mentoring relationships between the learner and a more experienced member of the Wicca group. In our sample, nearly all the participants new to Wicca find a mentor or tutor who is instrumental in their learning. Ziggy described his experience with a mentor as very close, noting that “we did things together, we went to different social activities that required some type of counseling to other people, other folks such as prisons and so forth . . . , and work with those folks together. So we were like brothers by the time we got finished.”

Integrated Nature of the Learning Process

The integrative nature of the learning process is actually recognized by the participants as evidenced by their comments. Arwen’s experience provides an illustration of how many participants viewed their learning process. In delineating the chronology of her learning process to become a Wiccan, Arwen provides a summary of the integrative nature of learning to become a Wiccan:

. . . there’s no real time line. It’s more like it happened all the time, okay, because you’re reading books, doing workshops with each other, you’re doing actual circles and doing actual work . . . it’s all meshed in together, it’s not separated out. There’s no book phase, practice phase, then work phase for us.

Discussion

This study was designed to answer two questions about learning in an environment that has received little to no attention in previous research on adult learning: what motivates adults to engage in learning that leads to membership in a marginalized group and what is the learning process adults experience as they study to become members in a group that is on the fringes of society. We found that our sample was motivated by strong, internal forces that were often manifest in childhood and that endured over several years. For those individuals who recognized their inner urges early in life, it is as if they are predisposed toward Wicca.

We also discovered a learning process characterized by components that are integrated, that complement and depend on each other. The process is initiated by the first component in which the individual responds to an intense curiosity brought on by the recognition that they are different or that they have questions about life that are not being answered by traditional religious beliefs. This recognition of unique abilities and frustration with existing beliefs encourages exploration about other philosophies and religions primarily through self-directed study and particularly through reading. The search leads the individual to initial knowledge about Wicca. Further study about Wicca follows; it is characterized by formal classes that are complemented by continued reading, mentoring, and reflection. Immersion in study about Wicca leads to membership.

Tough (1971) discovered the importance of intrinsic motivation in his work with self-directed learners. Moreover, he observes, “strong irrational forces within him (the learner) may be influential,

though he may not even be conscious of them” (1971, p. 44). Our participants exhibited evidence of strong internal forces that encouraged their self-directed learning; some were aware of them early in life, others became aware of them later indicating that the forces may have been present and at work but out of the consciousness of the participant. Although only a few of them described these forces as irrational, most realized that their feelings and thoughts were counter to the thinking of their family and friends.

In contrast to Tough’s (1971) assertion that self-directed learners are motivated partially by the need for knowledge and skill that they can obtain and have only a few days or weeks later, our participants engaged in years of self-directed study and formal classes to find out about Wicca. This deviation in our study from Tough’s work reflects another aspect of the motivation of our participants—the enduring nature of their motivation. It depicts not only the strength and intensity of the forces that were behind their learning but the sustained period of learning. The long-lasting nature of their motivation helps to explain how our participants would persist in learning towards membership in a stigmatized group.

Another finding related to the question of what motivates an individual to enter a learning experience to join a marginalized group is the emphasis given to preadult motivating factors. Although events in early life as stimulants to learning have been acknowledged in the adult education literature, there is very little empirical research about such factors. One of the few, concerted efforts to examine in an empirical way the effects of preadult factors on adult participation was the study published by Cervero and Kirkpatrick in 1990; however, their predicted variables were almost all external in nature. Our findings are different in that they offer empirical evidence of the impact of *internal*, preadult factors on participation learning in peripheral organizations. We think this finding confirms the importance of preadult factors and encourage future research on this relatively overlooked area in the motivation and participation literature for mainstream and borderline adult learning organizations.

Turning now to the question about the learning process to become a Wiccan, we found that our participants engaged in activities that combined informal and formal activities. As we demonstrated above, what the participants described to us was an integrated process in which multiple learning formats were accessed in order to meet their goal: self-directed learning that emphasized reading and discussion with others; participation in classes that involved considerable use of experiential techniques; mentoring; and reflection.

There is a linkage between the learning process uncovered in this study and Spear’s (1988) self-directed learning model. For example, our learning process confirms what Spear (1988) and others (Danis and Tremblay, 1987, 1988) who used part of his framework found with respect to learning formats, namely that self-directed learners use multiple approaches to accomplish their goals. And, the fact that our participants had no definitive plan for their self-directed reading substantiates Berger’s (1990) finding that her subjects did no preplanning in their self-directed learning projects.

The learning process for joining Wicca also involves considerable reflection. As Kyle succinctly expressed it, Wicca is a “head religion . . . and you think through things.” This practice is facilitated by mentoring, another learning technique utilized by our participants. Although books and classes identify and describe the activities and symbolism in Wicca, initiates still need the help of more learned members to interpret the meaning of the practices and their symbolic nature. Whether this finding is true for other marginalized or mainstream social groups will be for future research to determine.

The use of formal and informal approaches to learning by our participants suggests another

area for investigation. The holistic, integrated approach to learning utilized by the participants in this study confirms that learners build on previous learning and readily shift learning styles in order to achieve their goals. Our participants' learning was described earlier as incremental. They acted from their initial motivation and found a part of the answer to their questions utilizing self-guided reading and discussion with others. Partial answers encouraged them on to new information and approaches to learning. For example, they shifted their reading to a focus on Wicca-related subjects, and they enrolled in classes and employed experiential techniques, reflection, and mentoring. Is this holistic approach what actually happens in most adult learning activities, be they in mainstream or marginal settings? That is to say, in our attempts to understand adult learning by focusing on individual approaches such as self-directed learning, experiential learning, or reflective thinking have we given less emphasis to the fact that learners actually blend these ways of learning to achieve their objectives?

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