ABSTRACT

GARDNER, LAUREN EASTMAN. The Psychotherapy Experience of Pagans: a Narrative Phenomenological Inquiry. (Under the direction of Dr. Siu-Man Raymond Ting).

Pagans are a growing religious or spiritual minority in the United States, yet there is limited research examining best practices for multicultural counseling with this population. Certain aspects of Paganism, including but not limited to animism and work with spirits or deities, differentiate Pagans, although these may be misunderstood, or misinterpreted as pathological, by counselors or psychotherapists who are unfamiliar with key aspects of the Pagan worldview. The researcher interviewed 13 Pagans on their experiences in counseling and psychotherapy, conducted follow-up interviews, and analyzed salient themes in the interview transcripts. Recommendations for counseling with this population are also discussed based on participant suggestions.
The Psychotherapy Experience of Pagans: a Narrative Phenomenological Inquiry

by
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DEDICATION

For Artemis, Ἁ Πότνια Ὄηρῶν.

For the Pagan and magickal community. May you all enjoy health, wealth, strength, joy, and peace.
BIOGRAPHY

Lauren Gardner is a Licensed Professional Counselor who sees adults and couples in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Lauren completed her undergraduate degree at UNC-Chapel Hill in 2006 and earned her Master’s in Psychology from the University of West Georgia, a program that specialized in Humanistic Psychology. Lauren is also a counselor educator and has most recently worked as a teaching assistant for North Carolina State University, providing course support, guest lectures, clinical supervision, and administrative tasks. She has presented on the topic of Pagans in psychotherapy at state-level counseling conferences, and has served as an advocate for Pagans in multiple contexts. Also, Lauren has been engaged in presenting workshops on mental health outreach for the Pagan community for a number of years. She currently lives in Raleigh, North Carolina.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Statement of Problem

According to the American Counseling Association’s Code of Ethics (2014), counselors are expected to practice multiculturally competent counseling. This standard includes a sensitivity to client spirituality and religion in all aspects of the professional work of a counselor. On the topic of assessment in particular, the code of ethics states, “Counselors recognize the effects of… spirituality… and they place test results in proper perspective with other relevant factors.” (ACA, 2014). Additionally, the code of ethics is further supplemented by a set of spiritual and religious competencies drafted by the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC), and these competencies direct counselors to educate themselves on the spiritual and/or religious perspectives of their clients, engaging in personal reading, or seeking out consultation if needed (ASERVIC 2009). Furthermore, according to Young, Cashwell, Wiggins-Frame, and Belaire (2011), trainee counselors are not always adequately prepared by their coursework to explore religious and spiritual topics with clients, and counselor educators often do not feel prepared to integrate such material into their curriculum. Although these ASERVIC competencies and related competencies have been presented by Cashwell & Watts (2010) in order to provide more comprehensive guidelines for counselors to address spiritual or religious topics in counseling, and although clients consistently express a wish to discuss spirituality in counseling sessions (Rose et al., 2008), often these topics are still excluded (McVittie & Tilopouios, 2006). According to one study, “the exclusion [of spirituality]… does not reflect
therapists’ lack of knowledge or awareness but can more usefully be seen as the discursive accomplishment of marginalizing clients’ beliefs.” (McVittie & Tilopouios, 2006). Such marginalizing client beliefs are particularly pronounced when the client belongs to any marginalized population. Lack of understanding or respect of the therapist or counselor for the client’s beliefs—or for any aspect of the client’s identity—can have a detrimental impact on the therapeutic process (McVittie & Tilopouios, 2006; Whitwell & Barker, 1980).

The counselor or therapist seeking to increase their competence might then wonder how the counseling or psychotherapy environment could become more a welcoming space, one that is felt to be capable of containing the entire lived world of Pagan individuals, even when they may hold any of these “marginalizing client beliefs,” as McVitte and Tilopouis (2006) describe them. Researchers in this arena further note that, even where clients’ spiritual beliefs are made explicit, those beliefs they are sometimes excluded from consideration, by being regarded as part of the symptomatology rather than as matters for exploration in their own right—an attitude which strips those beliefs of their meaning (McVitte & Tiliopoulos 2006; Whitwell & Barker, 1980). The discursive perspective offered by McVitte & Tiliopoulos (2006) offers valuable insights into the deeper ontological assumptions inherent in the socially-constructed nature of the clinical space, and they urge us to take ownership of counseling and psychotherapy as a practice with its own set of epistemological assumptions, constructed by discourse and by culture. However, such exclusions—or even pathologizations—serve to adumbrate precisely the research concern that this study aims to address.

To compound the problem, there are limited resources to assist psychotherapists in understanding how the lived world of Pagans intersects with the counseling or psychotherapy
environment. A few resources are extant now in the literature, chief among them being the exploratory study of Harris et al (2016). However, the small sample sizes and college-student population of the Harris et al (2016) study make this resource of limited utility—and even then, such research can be useful only when a counselor or therapist is aware that their client is Pagan, and when they have both the time and the willingness to read up on what is admittedly a small percentage of the population. Pagans may be less likely to disclose this identity because, “Pagans seeking counselling and therapy may be concerned that a psychotherapist or counsellor will perceive their spiritual practices and any beliefs in magic or non-ordinary phenomena and states of consciousness as symptomatic of a psychological disorder.” (Crowley, 2007, para. 2). As the author has shown, there is a number of unique characteristics of this population in particular that demand a significant level of multicultural competence on the part of the counselor or psychotherapist.

Among Pagans in particular, this situation is particularly fraught, and Tejeda (2014) conducted a mixed-methods study that found that discrimination and workplace ridicule were “commonplace” for Pagans, even when compared to other more mainstream faiths. Furthermore, Tejeda (2014) found that Pagans had significantly lower job satisfaction. Due to the unique nature of their worldview on the one hand, and to the small nature of the community on the other, Pagans face a dilemma when seeking counseling or psychotherapy. (Crowley, 2017, p. 113; Harris et al, 2016). Unfortunately, according to Crowley’s exploratory qualitative study, “lack of knowledge of and negative attitudes toward Paganism can create difficulties for Pagans in engaging in therapeutic relationships.” (2017, p. 113.). The unique features of the Pagan worldview, like those of any spiritual and religious tradition, have a bearing on the topics and material that a client brings up in session. This
results in a unique situation, since this lack of awareness can create a situation where counselors treating Pagan individuals have few resources by which to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of either their worldview or the unique issues that his worldview may present in the clinical environment. To make matters worse, according to Crowley (2017), “Media coverage on Paganism is often derogatory and belittling.” (p. 114).

Finally, for those who identify as New Age or practice Pagan traditions that counselors may have never heard of prior to meeting that client, it can be challenging for the counselor to understand the multifaceted nature of the community, and to find clinical resources that are meaningful to the client’s unique context, especially if that client does not identify as Pagan but shares certain beliefs and/or practices common to them (Harris, 2016).

The admittedly amorphous definition of “Pagan” presents further difficulties as well. Self-identification provokes a discussion of navigating the meaning such an identity has for a client— that is, if the client even identifies fully as Pagan, rather than simply participating “a-la-carte” in the community, practices, or worldview, as many individuals may choose to do (Harris, 2016). Like many new religious movements, definitions may also carry a somewhat political charge, and this is exacerbated by the decentralized nature of many Pagan communities in general (Crowley, 2017; Harris et al, 2016). It is also worth noting that the vast majority of American Pagans were not raised with this particular religious background and later came to self-identify as Pagan, so the family support networks may not function in the same way as for members of smaller religious traditions (Davy, 2006; Harris et al, 2016).

For the purposes of this study, I will follow the definition of Pagan suggested by Harris et al (2016). Traditionally, New Age movements have been more difficult to define the boundaries of, and thus more difficult to correctly measure and operationalize (Davy,
Because of this amorphous quality, these groups are likely to escape survey data. However, despite this limitation, researchers are beginning to include survey data on the Pagan demographics in the United States. The most current and rigorous example is their inclusion in the 2014 Religious Landscapes Survey, conducted by the Pew Research Center.

**Need and Rationale for the Study**

As mentioned previously, until recently, few resources have existed for counselors and psychotherapists to educate themselves about the Pagan population and improve their multicultural competence with this group. This situation constitutes a noticeable gap in the literature. Fortunately, within the past few years, several studies have been published specifically exploring the experiences of Pagans in counseling and psychotherapy. The most significant prior exploration into the worldview of Pagans, conducted with intent to develop a resource for clinicians, was in the work of Harris et al (2016), who interviewed college students who identified as Pagan. The other significant prior study was Crowley (2017), who interviewed 8 Pagan adults in Great Britain. Other resources include scholarship from other fields, including the introductory work from Davy (2006) in the aim of establishing Pagan studies as an academic field, and, although a bit dated now, the Pagan census conducted in the United States during the 1990s (Berger et al, 2003).

However, both Harris et al. (2016) and Crowley (2017) are limited in their generalizability to adult populations in the United States. While Crowley (2017) explored specifically the experiences of Pagans in counseling and psychotherapy, the study was conducted with a limited sample and using a British population, which differs in a few key ways from Pagans in the United States.
It is quite possible that some of the conclusions of Crowley (2017) may not be applicable to the Pagan communities in the United States for two key reasons. One, the Pagans themselves differ from those in Great Britain, and two, the landscape of counseling and psychotherapy is quite different in the United States due to managed care, structural differences in how these services are delivered, other cultural and economic factors relating to how counseling is conducted and perceived. Clients of counseling and psychotherapy in the United States are more likely to have time-limited therapy, and for their access to culture-sensitive care to be more closely linked to their socioeconomic status.

Although it may be asserted that the Pagan population in the United States is small in comparison to other marginalized religious or spiritual groups, this is a community that is beginning to attract research attention in the United States. Because some limited ethnographic and social science resources exist now for both scholars and clinicians, additional research is needed to help counselors and psychotherapists in particular understand topics that are unique to the Pagan population. Seeing as counseling and psychotherapy presents a more intimate environment than the usual interpersonal encounter, understanding how Pagans navigate this space is quite important. One therapist in Britain who works with this population indicated, “Pagans tend to have a… mentality that only a Pagan can treat a Pagan.” (“Gareth,” qtd. in Crowley, 2017, p. 125).

Crowley (2017) also suggested that Pagan therapists build a referral network for Pagan clients, but this presupposes that there exist clinicians outside the Pagan community who are multiculturally competent in this area. Ideally such individuals would also be distanced enough to avoid potential dual relationships or boundary violations, which present a potential ethical concern in small communities (ACA, 2014). A number of the Pagan
clinicians interviewed by Crowley (2017) an acute awareness about personal boundary issues, given that many Pagans prefer to see Pagan counselors, and that the is somewhat small and insular.

Perhaps different recommendations from Crowley (2017) would be more appropriate in the United States, or perhaps counselors and psychotherapists outside of Pagan communities could improve their competence to make them more appealing to Pagans seeking these services. However, literature such as the current proposed study would benefit counselors and psychotherapists who work with Pagans, as well as clients who participate in Pagan communities or practices. The stigma Pagans face, mentioned by Crowley (2017) and Berger et al (2003), likely makes these individuals reticent to disclose this identity in counseling sessions, even though research suggests that individuals in counseling and psychotherapy consistently wish to discuss topics of spirituality (Rose et al., 2008).

Furthermore, the authors of the 1990s Pagan census encountered the same issue when conducting their census, indicating that, “Because they fear discrimination and persecution, many Neo-Pagans [a frequent term for Pagans in 1990s scholarship] are apprehensive about making public their identification with this movement.” (Berger et al, 2003). For counselors and psychotherapists who identify as Pagan, the same concern is likely to apply as well.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the current study is to explore how Pagans in the United States experience counseling and psychotherapy environments, with an eye toward how Pagan beliefs and worldviews views intersect with the particular environment of counseling or psychotherapy. This topic extends to both experiences seeking out counseling or psychotherapy services, as well as participating as a client or patient in counseling or
psychotherapy. Participants may have received or sought out these services in any type of clinical setting, including inpatient, group, or private office settings. These participants need not have been diagnosed with any mental illness.

The target group for the study is individuals identifying as Pagan who currently or have in the past five years participated in some form of counseling or psychotherapy. Exclusion criteria include no experience with counseling or psychotherapy, no identification as Pagan, or severe and persistent mental illnesses. Additionally, participants will be selected who have some involvement with local Pagan communities, as this involvement serves as a check against the veracity of the client’s depth of personal identification with the Pagan tradition.

The specific experience of Pagan clients in counseling or psychotherapy has not been previously explored in prior research, except for the aforementioned book chapter written by Crowley (2017), and this research used a British population which limits its generalizability for the current study. Harris et al. (2016) stopped short of exploring the experience of seeking a psychotherapist and how this process is experienced by Pagan individuals. Their goal in their study was to provide an overview of the worldview, beliefs, and other ethnographic factors that constitute the Pagan worldview. Crowley (2017) limited the interviews to seven and studied a population outside the United States. The current study is unique in exploring what unique issues might appear in the intersection between Pagan beliefs, and the counseling or psychotherapy environment in the Southeastern United States.
Philosophical and Theoretical Foundation for the Study

Relationship Between Phenomenology and Theory

The phenomenological approach is largely informed by the philosophy of Edmund Husserl (Wertz, 2005). “Husserl’s phenomenology uses the familiar methodological principle that scientific knowledge begins with a fresh and unbiased description of its subject matter.” (Wertz, 2005, p. 167). In the service of seeking an unbiased description of experience qualitative phenomenological studies such as the one proposed may utilize a more limited theoretical framework, and the intentionally minimal nature of this theoretical framework is an invaluable feature of this approach (Wertz, 2005). Simply speaking, from a phenomenological sensibility, we are seeking to develop a theory about the phenomenon we are observing, and such an approach requires a “bracketing” of previous knowledge which could unduly influence the research to conform with prior knowledge (Tufford & Newman, 2012, Wertz, 2005). More precisely, according to Wertz (2005), it is:

...a methodological abstention used to suspend or put out of play our “naïve” belief in the existence of what presents itself in the life-world in order to focus instead on its subjective manners of appearance and givenness— the lived-through meanings and the subjective performances that subtend human situations.” (Wertz, 2005, p. 168).

This approach involves a selected limitation of one’s prior knowledge or theories about the subject matter in order to allow additional space for new knowledge, and to privilege experience firsthand (Wertz, 2005). Theory grows from the findings of such investigation, but it does not provide the structure (Osborne, 1990; Wertz, 2005). Osborne (1990) states, “the phenomenological researcher is looking for structures to present themselves rather than looking for a structure based upon a preconceived theory.” (p. 85). In this study, while
certain theories to be explained later, including critical theory and even analytical psychology, may be useful, it is important for the phenomenological researcher to refrain from their application until after the data is collected (Osborne, 1990).

Understanding how individuals situate themselves in the world and understand its meaning for them is phenomenology in a nutshell (Van Manen, 1997). Phenomenology, then, is an exploration of the essence of meaning within a particular lived experience, and to that end, phenomenology positions that new knowledge arises from fresh engagement with such lived experience. The theoretical constructs unique to the research topic factor more heavily into the end of the research process than at the beginning. Although this study will follow suit in minimizing the application of theory at the outset, it seems likely that critical theory and theories of marginalization may be relevant to the data, and these may be important to understanding the experiences of Pagans in this study. However, to apply these theories too liberally at the outset would risk bias.

**Perils of Humanistic Qualitative Methodology**

As noted previously, phenomenological research should be guided by, not determined by, prior theories about the subject matter (Wertz, 2005). However, this bracketing of prior knowledge itself presents a dilemma, seeing as our prior theory— and our even tacit epistemology— predetermines how we go about the socially-constructed project of doing research, from seeking Institutional Research Board approval, to recruiting participants, and even drafting a proposal such as this one. Tacit ideas about what constitutes valid knowledge may be deconstructed with relative ease using postmodern approaches, but research projects seeking to fit within the scope of, shall we say, a dissertation, must still meet certain parameters before the study begins. There are expectations on how such a document must be
structured, even if the project might lend itself to a slightly different structure. At the risk of stating the most obvious, these boundaries on our types of knowing are applied before even beginning the search for knowledge. While qualitative post-positivist research orientations have gained traction in the counseling field in recent years, these approaches remain comparatively new to the field of counseling research (Wertz, 2005). According to St. Pierre (2014), since the nuances of these methods are often not taught comprehensively in graduate training programs, the incompatibilities between new postmodern sensibilities on the one hand, and humanistic qualitative research on the other, can be unacknowledged and therefore extremely difficult to reconcile.

St. Pierre (2014) deftly identified the trouble with such a situation as it applies to qualitative humanistic methodology. In her critique, she identifies the “incommensurability” of defending any sort of qualitative methodology from postmodernism, and calls for a post-qualitative approach (St. Pierre, 2014). A similar situation arises when seeking to do phenomenology—that is, seeking the essence of an experience—alongside the postmodern ideas that allow us to instantly dismiss any such “essence” as a social construct that we have ourselves created. The “ontological turn,” as she describes it, is an attempt to overcome this dilemma.

For the sake of engaging the subject matter, rather than getting lost in the foundational impossibility of the project, this project will admittedly rely on some of those problematic “humanistic qualitative methods” St. Pierre describes, including reduction of the participant’s experience to text, which is then analyzed (St. Pierre, 2014). With all due respect to St. Pierre (2014), and the richness of the methodological concerns explored in her work, fully addressing the shortcomings of post-positivism is well beyond the scope of this
study. However, in the search for the essence of participant experience, the researcher will endeavor to proceed with a particular postmodern sensibility of what has, perhaps, been progressively lost in the conversion of an interpersonal encounter, into an audio recording, into transcribed text.

Beyond the more expansive philosophical framework of post-positivism, there are two additional noteworthy theories that may inform this study. The word “may” is used in the spirit of phenomenological bracketing, for approaching the research participants with an open attitude is most likely to avoid bringing any unnecessary bias to the project (Wertz, 2005).

**Critical Theory**

An awareness of the interactive and interpersonal dimension that is lost in the conversion to text, and particularly speculation about who stands to benefit from that particular loss, leads into the theories of critical psychology. An understanding of critical theory and, in particular, critical psychology, may help us to understand how power relationships are intimately related with stigma. Such a situation is particularly marked when psychotherapy is provided according to a medical model, which it frequently is in the United States in order for facilities and clinicians to receive insurance reimbursement for the services rendered. According to Foucault (1973), the medical facility is by its very nature dehumanizing, and prioritizes the record and diagnosis over the personhood of the individual seeking assistance. The medical clinic places power and control with the clinician, not with the client, and in the author’s reading of Foucault (1973), the influence of insurance and managed care organizations—and perhaps also healthcare administrators—has increasingly displaced the power which had been previously held by physicians and even mental health professionals. An awareness and sensitivity to power dynamics in the lived world of Pagans,
as they encounter counselors or psychotherapists, or even the researcher, may prove to be an important theme in the current study. Such sensitivity also extends to how psychopathology is constructed, and how those tacit ideas may influence helping relationships for Pagans in particular, as noted by Crowley (2017).

Outside the context of the counseling or psychotherapy relationship, numerous authors have identified stigma as a key issue affecting Pagan individuals in society more broadly speaking (Crowley, 2017; Harris et al, 2016). Marginalization is another key construct that may appear as a theme in interviews with participants, as this theme has emerged in other studies of Pagans. Perceived stigma will be explored in research interviews where appropriate.

**Analytical Psychology**

Finally, the analytical psychology of Carl Jung may also be a theory of interest. Although Jung’s ideas seem to have lost credibility in the academic world some time ago, it is interesting that these ideas appear to be widespread among the Pagan community as a framework for structuring their own experiences (Waldron & Waldron, 2004). Vivienne Crowley, the author of the 2017 study mentioned earlier, has in other locations expressed her adoption of Jung’s theory as a clinician, and her use of Jungian theory as a research framework in her 1980s scholarship of neo-Pagans (Waldron & Waldron, 2004). In previous scholarship on Pagan practices, “Jungian understanding of the nature and function of the symbolic has proved to be an invaluable model for the legitimization of Pagan rituals, mythology, and historical narrative.” (Waldron & Waldron, 2004, p. 33). Crowley (2017) also noted that Pagan individuals have tended to seek out counselors or psychotherapists espousing a Jungian orientation.
In that light, it is possible that Jung’s ideas could provide a useful lens through which to understand Pagan experiences of psychotherapy—particularly since Pagan individuals themselves appear to be adopting this theory to describe their own experiences. Furthermore, it is possible that the disappearance of Jung from current academic circles is in some way a parallel process to the marginalization experienced by Pagan individuals and communities. Space unfortunately does not permit a full exploration of all Jungian theoretical constructs that may apply to Pagan experiences of counseling and psychotherapy, but relevant concepts derived from Jungian theory will be explored in the results section, as applicable.

**Significance of the Study**

Statistics on the prevalence of Pagans also vary widely, as many survey instruments assessing religion / spirituality do not provide options for participants to identify as “Pagan” as a discrete category. The limitations of such labels for similar religious groups were already discussed, as are the limitations of self-identification for a group as amorphous as Pagans (Berger et al, 2003). Individuals identifying as Pagan or engaging in Pagan practices have only been the subject of study in recent decades. Much of that study appears to have come and gone in the late 1990s to early 2000s, with a more current resurgence beginning in 2016.

The Religious Landscapes Survey, conducted in 2014 by the Pew Research Center, is one of the few such surveys that included a category identifying Pagans and Wiccans. Wiccans are a related but more formalized religious group that often overlaps with Paganism (Harris et al, 2016). In the Pew poll data, self-reported Wiccans and Pagans together constituted 0.3% of the total U.S. population, which is approximately 956,000 people (2016). This indicates that nearly a million individuals in the United States alone self-identify as Pagan or Wiccan. To provide context to the reader on how common Pagans are, the same
Pew poll data indicated that .9% of individuals polled identified as Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2014). According to this data, for approximately every three Muslims in the United States in 2014, there was one person identifying as Pagan. For context, in the UK, census data demonstrated that Pagans were the seventh-largest religious group (Crowley, 2014).

For a minority group of this size, it is striking that there are so few clinical resources to help increase multicultural competence for counselors and psychotherapists working with Pagans, and that extant resources have only been produced quite recently. However, a number of exploratory qualitative studies (Crowley, 2017; Harris et al, 2016) have been conducted exploring the various issues that Pagans would like for their counselors and psychotherapists to understand. The current study endeavors to build on that prior research.

The potential contributions of this study include the development of an additional resource for counselors and psychotherapists working with Pagan individuals, in the service of identifying the particular multicultural issues unique to this population, especially those that can emerge in the counseling or psychotherapy environment. Also, within the Pagan community, the current study could assist Pagan leaders to act as advocates for those in their communities as they interact with counselors, psychotherapists, or any other mental health professional who may not be familiar with Paganism. The current study may also offer a useful resource for the personal empowerment of Pagan individuals seeking counseling or psychotherapy. Perhaps these interviews could spur them to self-advocate more effectively, or to provide them the benefit of witnessing some of their own feelings or experiences reflected in the interviews.
Research Questions

The research questions are as follows. How do Pagans experience themselves in counseling or psychotherapy? How do Pagans navigate their identity and beliefs in a counseling or psychotherapy environment? How do Pagans feel that counseling or psychotherapy could improve in serving their unique needs?

These research questions have been influenced by a number of anecdotal interactions in which Pagan individuals, from various regions and denominations, have told the author about how they felt their beliefs had been perceived by counselors and psychotherapists. In other anecdotal interactions, these individuals have reported workplace discrimination, family tensions, and other undesirable social outcomes due to their identities. These assorted anecdotes have led the author to wonder if counselors and psychotherapists in the community have adequate competence in working with Pagans entering counseling or psychotherapy. Because the Pagan community is small and dispersed compared to the general population, and because the average psychotherapist may not even know if she or he has ever worked with a Pagan client, the most effective way to explore this topic involves going directly to Pagans themselves to determine their experiences.

Definition of Terms

“Pagan” vs “Neo-pagan”

There is a particular difficulty in defining what is meant by the term “Pagan” in this study, and this difficulty has been no small one for other researchers in the social sciences. Following the convention of Harris et al (2016), the current study will favor the term “Pagan,” capitalized, in order to avoid the bias that has become attached to the term “neo-Pagan” in recent years. While such bias appears to not have existed in the earlier wave of
research from the 1990’s and early 2000’s, since that time, the scholarship has slowly shifted toward the term “Pagan,” capitalized, to describe what is effectively the same group of individuals. For this community, there are many people involved with Pagan practices, and there are also many solitary practitioners and those who do not identify as Pagan, yet still participate in some way in the community. For the purposes of this study, “Pagan” will be determined by the participant’s own self-identification with that term, and validity will be determined by relying on community leaders in Pagan communities who are assisting in recruiting participants.

To further complicate matters, The Encyclopedia of Religion does not provide a cogent, contemporary definition for Pagan or neo-Pagan. The encyclopedia entry provided by Pike (2005) of Neopaganism emphasizes qualities like valuing nature, individual spirituality, and newness over tradition (Pike, 2005, p. 6470-6474). For the purposes of this study, we will not differentiate among these four approaches Pike presents, seeing as they largely overlap and intersect (Waldron, 2014). Although Pike (2005) utilizes the term “neo-Pagan,” more current authors suggest that scholars would do better to avoid this (Harris et al, 2016).

For the purposes of this study, then, the author has chosen to adopt the following definition of “Pagan” suggested by Harris et al. (2016):

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, and some people distinguish modern Pagans from historical pagans by
capitalizing the former and leaving the latter uncapitalized. 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. (p. 859)

Understandably, the above definition is complex, and unfortunately and unavoidably
somewhat vague in certain ways. However, there is no way to avoid that vagueness, seeing as
we are examining a spiritual or religious identity that has a wide range of intra-group
variation. To supplement the Harris et al (2017) definition with an emic perspective, here is
how one respondent from the Pagan census chose to define their identity:

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 to be allowed
true religious freedom, acceptance, and recognition. (Survey 1779 in Berger et al.

Another respondent to the Pagan census offered much stronger feelings on how research was
conducted, writing, “Your survey sounds like you’re trying to arrive at some conclusion on
who a typical Pagan is… That’s BULLSHIT!” (Survey 2425, in Berger et al., 2003, p. 226).

As we have seen, a very precise definition of Paganism would be difficult to
establish, risks being politically fraught, and would likely present the Pagan identity as
somewhat more unified than it actually appears to be (Berger et al., 2003; Harris, 2017).
Such a definition would also potentially exclude many individuals, potentially even de-
legitimizing their spiritual identities. Additionally, to more precisely define such a group, one
risks passing judgment on the validity of a staggering number of different groups and sub-
traditions, including Wiccans, druids, and others, as to whether or not they fall within the appropriate categories.

According to Taira (2010), classification of Pagan groups is also politically fraught, especially when recognized status can confer particular privileges that are not shared by other unrecognized and closely-related groups. Such classification along certain lines risks creating fractures in Pagan communities when some groups receive political recognition, and others do not (Taira, 2010). One example of these privileges in the United States is the right to serve as a military chaplain, which requires the individual to ascribe to one of the identified religions in a key Department of Defense personnel document. Scholars of religions studying Paganism therefore have to navigate the same politics of ambivalent identity, in a parallel process to that which Pagans themselves encounter (Crowley, 2017; Taira, 2010).

Unfortunately, the difficulties inherent in defining the Pagan population may be related to the dearth of research on this particular spiritual or religious tradition in the social science literature. By the same token, however, that very same amorphous quality has perhaps made “Pagan” a more appealing religious identification for its adherents (Berger et al., 2003). Although the struggle to establish the best possible definition is one shared by a number of researchers in the field, for the purposes of this study, we must ultimately rely on validity of the participants’ own self-expressed statement of identification as Pagan, as validated through their involvement with various communities and local Pagan organizations and alliances.

**Counseling or Psychotherapy**

Providing a satisfactory definition of counseling or psychotherapy poses an additional, if less troubling, challenge. This culturally-situated practice that we call
“counseling” or “psychotherapy” touches on a staggering range of professional disciplines, including professional counselors, social workers, marriage & family therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, psychiatric nurse practitioners, life coaches, and others. The distinctions between these professions may be quite clear—and very important indeed!—to those who hold a professional identity as a practitioner of one of these disciples, or who maintain a license as such. However, those inter-professional distinctions may or may not be so significant in how that helping professional is seen by a Pagan client or patient.

“Counseling” or “psychotherapy” is a service that may be provided by a range of individuals, licensed or unlicensed, treating a medical condition or not, across a staggering range of clinical modalities, and housed in a range of settings, as elaborated previously. In the participant materials, then, the term “counseling or psychotherapy” will be used more as a reference to the social interaction or environment. This study will rely on the participant’s own self-reported feeling of having been in “counseling or psychotherapy.” Of course, not all participants in the study necessarily will have had a diagnosable mental illness. Participants who appear to meet criteria for severe and persistent mental illness will be excluded, and community leaders in Pagan communities will be recruited to assist in this screening process by using their own internal channels to distribute study recruitment material.

Additionally, for the purposes of this study, we will also include experiences of pastoral counseling within Pagan communities. Seeing as individuals providing pastoral counseling in the Pagan community are likely to already be immersed within the community itself, it is quite likely that the participant experience is somewhat different than when clinical services are provided by a person—whatever their credentials or profession—outside of the Pagan community. These experiences will be included in order to allow participants to
express their experiences of what works within their own communities, in the service of providing an emic perspective.

Limitations

This study has a number of important limitations, which will be expounded below.

Phenomenological Reduction

When doing phenomenology, we are in search of phenomenological essences, or the essence of a lived experience. To do phenomenology means to inevitably reduce experience to language, and then to a supposed essence. One shortcoming of phenomenology is the assumption that there is a unitive, discrete essence to an experience. It is possible that the data of the interviews does not reveal any discrete essence to the experience, but rather a number of different experiences that do not share a common essence. In such a case, the project may be limited to identification of and exploration of salient themes across the interview transcripts.

Self-selecting Sample

Exploratory qualitative designs, including phenomenology, always come with a number of limitations. For one, this study will be limited due to a self-selection bias even with the recruiting assistance of local and regional Pagan leaders. It is possible that Pagans who have had negative experiences in mental health treatment will be more likely to opt into the study, as the interview provides an opportunity for them to share these negative experiences, or perhaps even attempt to self-advocate.

Fluid Nature of Pagan Identity

As explored previously when defining terms, Pagan is a difficult identity to prove or demonstrate in any truly reliable way. Most Pagans were not raised in Pagan families, but
came to self-identify on their own, sometimes after a personal conversion process (Harris et al., 2016). Others may participate actively in Pagan communities, but not commit to them for their entire lifetime, instead exploring Pagan identity in a more fluid sort of way (Berger et al., 2003). Still others may identify as Pagan, but practice in a solitary manner without involvement in any community at all.

**Geographic Sampling**

Pagans participating in this study will be drawn from communities on the East Coast of the United States. It is important to note that regional attitudes about religion may present important differences in perceptions of stigma. Due to the different demographics of these regions, these different perspectives are likely to be reflected in the religious or spiritual competence of counselors or psychotherapists in that area. Furthermore, even though the sample will be drawn from the East Coast of the United States, there may be a significant variation between the experiences of urban versus rural Pagans.

**Validity and Trustworthiness**

Finally, the trustworthiness of any phenomenological qualitative data relies on the degree to which the participants have trust in the investigator to disclose their experiences (Wertz, 2005). The author’s own familiarity with the community, and access to a number of contacts therein, should help improve the trustworthiness of the data, as will the assistance of local and regional Pagan leaders in distributing the study information to participants.

**Summary**

All things considered, the Pagan population is a noteworthy yet marginalized religious group in the United States (Berger et al., 2003; Pew Research Center, 2014). A the current time, only a very limited amount of research has been conducted exploring Pagan
experiences in counseling and psychotherapy (Crowley, 2017; Harris et al., 2016). There are a number of different issues confronting this particular population, including stigma, lack of understanding, fragmentary nature of some Pagan communities, and lack of intergenerational support shared by other religious groups and spiritual traditions (Berger et al., 2003; Crowley, 2017; Taira, 2010). These challenges may also affect the willingness of Pagans to speak to researchers.

The current study aims to better understand Pagan lived experiences in counseling and psychotherapy and perhaps provide information to better enable therapists of all disciplines to assist these individuals when they arrive in counseling centers or in psychotherapy offices. Furthermore, advocacy for Pagan clients begins with awareness, and perhaps increasing the awareness among counselors and psychotherapists that Pagans even exist— as human beings, and not as stereotypes from the media and television— would be the first step to improving their experiences in counseling or psychotherapy.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Overview

As mentioned previously, there is very limited literature on Pagan individuals in counseling and psychotherapy, and the literature that exists falls short of providing sufficient data for developing a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. The most relevant extant studies, Crowley (2017) and Harris et al. (2016), have been explained very briefly in the previous chapter, and each has significant limitations. In this chapter, these two studies will be summarized more thoroughly. There will also be a summary of two additional relevant studies examining the stigma experiences of Pagans, including Pagans in the workplace (Tejeda, 2015) and Pagans parenting in the southeastern United States (McLure, 2017). Finally, two additional references, Yardley (2008) and Moe, Cates and Sepulveda (2013) are provided as extant resources for clinicians working with very specific segments of the Pagan population.

Next, there will be an examination of several important theoretical concepts that will guide this study. The first of these is a brief overview of general multicultural theory and theories of marginalization. Then there will be an examination of the theory of concealable stigmatized identity (SCI), including an overview of the impacts of stigma and the various management strategies that individuals deploy for different types of CSIs in different social contexts. These management strategies include, but are not limited to, passing and covering. Finally, the theory section will include a brief overview of some theoretical concepts from Jungian or analytical psychology. Although this theory has been widely discredited in recent
decades, it has also been adopted by many Pagans themselves, and for this reason may
provide a helpful emic perspective (Crowley, 2017, p.122; Waldron & Waldron, 2004).

Finally, several research questions will be presented that are informed by these prior
studies and by the identified theories.

Crowley (2017)

The book chapter, “Pagan experiences of counselling and psychotherapy” appears in
a volume titled, “New religious movements and counseling: Academic, professional and
personal perspectives.” (Crowley, 2017). In addition to being personally active in a number
of different British Pagan and Wiccan communities, Vivienne Crowley is a British researcher
with a psychology background and a clinician trained in Jungian analytical psychology.
Crowley (2017) developed the “Pagan Counselling and Psychotherapy Questionnaire”
(PCPQ) from the results of a much more widely-distributed 2013 questionnaire titled, “Pagan
Census Responses Questionnaire” (PCRP). The PCRQ (2013) received over 1,700 responses,
and the PCPQ consisted of ten open-ended interview questionnaire responses. These ten
responses focused exclusively on counseling and psychotherapy experiences for Pagan
clients, and for Pagan counselors or psychotherapists. The responses were analyzed
according to an interpretive phenomenological approach, similar to the one to be used in the
current study.

Crowley (2017) includes an exploration of emergent themes from the PCPQ, such as
attitudes toward Paganism in Britain, psychology and Paganism, Paganism in the therapeutic
encounter, and Pagans as counselors and psychotherapists. At the current time of writing,
Crowley (2017) appears to be the only study which specifically examines the attitudes of
Pagans themselves towards counseling and psychotherapy. The chapter includes many block
quotes of respondents to both the earlier general Pagan census (PCRQ) as well as the more specific, counseling and psychotherapy-oriented, PCPQ.

It is also worth noting that Crowley as an individual appears to have a deep familiarity with the Pagan community through her prior scholarship record and involvement with the Pagan community in the United Kingdom (Crowley, 2017; 2014). The findings of the PCPQ reveal areas for advocacy and idiosyncratic needs of Pagan individuals within the counseling environment. Crowley (2017) recommends that counselors and psychotherapists maintain a resource referral list, such as the one that is maintained by the Pagan Federation in Britain.

The most salient limitation of Crowley (2017) is that the study was conducted entirely with a British population, and had only ten responses. British and American populations may differ significantly in the meaning of “Pagan,” as well as the community structure, values, and cultural context in which these Pagan communities are embedded (Crowley, 2017; Moe et al., 2013). Pagans in the United States have somewhat different views, values, and beliefs, and they may also face different sorts of stigma than Pagans in the United Kingdom (Berger et al, 2003, p. 7; Crowley, 2017, p. 126). A further critical limitation of the Crowley (2017) study includes the scarcity of methodological information. All methodological information for the PCPQ study is presented in a single footnote. Furthermore, there is no information in Crowley’s (2017) book chapter to indicate how participants were selected to for the PCPQ questionnaire, and ways that validity was ensured during the sampling process. Unfortunately, the actual PCPQ (2015) instrument was not included in the chapter.
Harris et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study of Pagans in the university context titled, “Paganism and Counseling: The Development of a Clinical Resource.” The study was focused on elucidating the worldview and identity development process of Pagan individuals, and also exploring their needs in counseling. Their research involved two interview protocols. For the first protocol, participants were asked questions about general Paganism, their identities, and their backgrounds as Pagans. In the second protocol, participants were asked about experiences in counseling and psychotherapy, including what participants felt counselors needed to know in order to provide effective care to Pagans (Harris et al, 2017, p. 862). The findings from this second interview protocol are the most relevant to the current project, but even these are also reflective of the developmental concerns unique to the college student population.

The findings relevant to the current study include a range of responses related to two key thematic areas: Pagan attitudes about mental health and psychotherapy, and recommendations for counselors and psychotherapists. However, critically, most of the participants had not had any personal experience in counseling or psychotherapy. Regarding Pagan attitudes towards counseling and psychotherapy, researchers noted:

Most of the Pagans we interviewed said they would prefer not to seek counseling themselves, or would only do so as a last resort… 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?” (Harris et al., 2016, p. 870).

After presenting these findings, Harris et al. (2016) proposed several recommendations for
counselors and psychotherapists based on the thematic categories of the responses, including
diagnostic issues, humor, autonomy, stigma, relationships, and sexuality. Regarding the area
of assessment and diagnosis with Pagans, they note:

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. (Harris et al., 2016,
p. 871).

The researchers also make particular note of the ways that stigma can affect the well-being of
Pagan individuals:

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. (Harris et al.,
2016, p. 871.)

Overall, the study appears to be quite well-conducted, methodologically sound, and
utilized simultaneous parallel interview procedure to ensure validity. One of the interviewers
was a practicing counselor and doctoral student in counseling psychology, while the other
was an undergraduate student who identified as third-generation Pagan. These interviewers
were selected to provide a balance between the emic and etic approach, ethnographically. However, in terms of data analysis, the study applied something of a mish-mash of qualitative methods, including “narrative analysis, empirical phenomenological qualitative research, grounded theory, anthropological ethnography, and Consensual Qualitative Research.” (Harris et al., 2017, p. 862). Like the Crowley (2017) study, and like the other concerns presented in the previous chapter, such a broad range of methodology is difficult to reconcile and may indicate too wide a range of approaches.

A primarily limitation of the Harris et al. (2016) study lies in the demographic characteristics of the sample. While the study contained equal numbers of men and women, all the participants were white. The researchers also focused on college students recruited from a mid-size Midwestern university, which indicates that only a very specific, white, young, and well-educated segment of the Pagan population is represented in this study (Harris et al, 2016). This critical diversity limitation of the sample was well-documented and examined by the researchers throughout. Therefore, it is notable that emphasis on Pagan identity development seen in the interviews from Harris et al. (2016) may well be related to the young ages of the participants in their particular sample, considering that identity is a particularly salient developmental concern for adolescents and young adults according to some models of psychosocial development. Furthermore, one may reasonably contend that older Pagans in counseling and psychotherapy may already be much more thoroughly established in their identities as Pagans.

The Harris et al. (2016) study is useful particularly for beginning to identify potential key thematic areas, and for the recommendations for counseling Pagan individuals in
particular. The themes identified regarding diagnosis and stigma will be used to inform the interview protocol for the current study.

**Tejeda (2015)**

We will now move on to two empirical studies exploring Pagan experiences of stigma in personal and professional spheres. Tejeda (2015) is an example of a study examining stigma that Pagans experience in the workplace specifically. McClure (2017) examines the impacts of stigma on Pagan parents in the southeastern United States.

Tejeda (2015) conducted a mixed-methods study titled, “Skeletons in the broom closet: exploring the discrimination of Pagans in the workplace.” This study contained two smaller studies, one qualitative using narrative interviews, and one quantitative, using a survey methodology.

The qualitative component of the study included 24 narrative interviews that were conducted face-to-face or via webcam, and then were analyzed using a step-wise approach. Tejeda (2015) took notes during the interviews, but did not record transcripts of the interviews. Tejeda (2015) remarked that “100% of the sample [all 24 interviews] reported that discrimination is not only a workplace issue but a broader issue about disclosing their faith to others at any time.” (p. 96). The fraught process of identity disclosure and “coming out of the broom closet,” to use a common phrase in the Pagan community, was explored in Study 1 (Tejeda 2015). The themes related to managing disclosure of one’s identity as Pagan are also particularly relevant for the current study. Tejeda (2015) noted that Pagans involved in professions that had licensing requirements reported the most concerns about being “outed” as Pagan (p. 96).
Tejeda (2015) describes one participant in Study 1 who provided a narrative that is particularly relevant to the current study. This participant—a healthcare worker who concealed their own Pagan identity at work—reported observing that a hospital chaplain in refused to assist a Pagan patient, or even to locate other clergy who were able to assist the family (Tejeda, 2015). According to this participant, the hospital administration was aware of the discrimination but did not reprimand the chaplain in any way (Tejeda, 2015, p. 96-7). The same participant also described outright mockery of the patient among the hospital staff following the patient’s discharge, and hearing this had a marked impact on the participant as an employee who had been carefully covering their own Pagan identity (Tejeda, 2015, p. 97). The frequency of such experiences is striking, seeing that all 24 participants in Study 1 “reported similar experiences with the kinds of ridicule and micro-aggressions cited above.” (Tejeda, 2015, p. 98.) Finally, many participants utilized a particular species of self-deprecating humor to mitigate the consequences of disclosure when revealing one’s Pagan identity could not be avoided, leading Tejeda (2015) to conclude, “unlike a mainstream faith, practitioners of Pagan faiths must minimize the importance of their religious expression in order to reassure others of their social acceptability.” (p. 99).

Study 2 is workplace-specific and therefore less applicable to the current study. The quantitative component tested six hypotheses derived from the narrative interviews, which were used to develop a survey instrument (Tejeda, 2016). The researcher surveyed both Pagans and adherents of Abrahamic faiths to compare these groups, and the Pagan sample consisted of 126 individuals sourced from an online Pagan community (Tejeda, 2016). Major findings from Study 2 confirm that Pagans reported consistently lower workplace satisfaction than those from the Abrahamic sample, and had significantly lower incomes even after
controlling for effects of education, race, and gender \( F(1, 287) = 4.26, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02 \)

with the average Pagan reporting earning almost 25% less in annual income (Tejeda, 2016, p. 103).

Overall, the findings provide quantitative substantiation that ridicule and discrimination against Pagans in the workplace is “commonplace,” is inclusive of both covert and overt victimization, and that Pagans report lower job satisfaction compared to adherents of more mainstream faiths (Tejeda, 2015, p. 88). Thematic findings of particular relevance to the current study have already been identified in the overview of Study 1.

It is worth noting that Tejeda (2015) offers a particularly well-composed review of the most salient extant literature on Pagans. It is rare to find a quantitative study on Pagan experiences of stigma; however, this exists in Study 2. The study contains a sound analysis and is an example of a well-applied mixed methods approach.

While the workplace focus of this study does not bear directly on the current study, Tejeda (2015) did derive the Study 1 sample from Pagans living in a similar region as the current study will sample—namely, the southeastern United States. Tejeda (2015) also identifies themes related to stigma, and the findings strongly support notions that stigma is experienced by Pagans in multiple sectors of their lives. Particularly, the Tejeda (2015) study may provide useful information for counselors working in EAP programs where such individuals may encounter and have opportunities to advocate for Pagan employees.

**McLure (2017)**

The study, “‘Becoming a Parent Changes Everything’: How Nonbeliever and Pagan Parents Manage Stigma in the U.S. Bible Belt” examines the stigma management strategies
utilized by nonbeliever and Pagan parents in the southeastern United States. (This literature review will focus only on the Pagan sample.) McClure (2017) compared nonbeliever parents with Pagan parents to demonstrate the differences in their coping strategies and techniques used for management of stigma. The research question was, “How do the religiously marginalized manage stigma as parents?” (McClure, 2017, p. 332). The researcher included the Pagan population as an example of a comparable population with more limited “financial and cultural capital,” at least as compared to the nonbeliever population (McClure, 2017).

The literature on Paganism surveyed by McClure (2017) emphasizes findings examining families and relationships in contemporary American Paganism. This characteristic emphasis provides a helpful counterpoint to the Tejeda (2015) study, which examined stigma that is encountered in the professional lives of Pagan individuals. McClure (2017) further identifies references to unique child custody struggles faced by Pagans, in light of stigma within other social systems, and how stigma against Pagans in particular areas may be leveraged in the judicial system when there is a custody battle (p. 334).

For the study, McClure (2017) interviewed 20 nonbelievers and 20 Pagans. The Pagan sample was drawn primarily from North Carolina and South Carolina, with one residing in Georgia and one in Virginia (McClure, 2017, p. 337). The author identifies these regions as exemplary of a “Bible Belt” region in the United States where Evangelical Christianity is widespread (McClure, 2017). Methods included textual analysis, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. Data was analyzed using qualitative grounded theory approaches.

McClure (2017) found that Pagan parents in this sample frequently managed stigma by a process of defensive othering, whereby they distanced themselves from other sorts of
Pagans in order to preserve their own legitimacy (p. 345). Predictably, the stereotype of the “hedonistic Pagan” was found to be the most threatening stereotype for the Pagan parents in the study, and the one against which the participants were quick to distance themselves (McClure, 2017, p. 346). Pagans in the study also expressed a number of concerns that were common to Pagans in other studies, including concern about family alienation, fear of being fired, and fear of being “outed.” (McClure, 2017, p. 347).

A critical shortcoming in this article is the approach to Pagans, and the questionable motivation of the researcher for including their experiences in the study. The Pagans included in this study are almost entirely from poor, working-class, and lower-middle-class backgrounds (McClure, 2017, p. 347). The skew towards lower-class individuals is not necessarily characteristic of the Pagan population as a whole, as demonstrated in other studies focusing exclusively on Pagans that included a more representative proportion of highly-educated individuals (Crowley, 2017; Harris et al., 2016). Unfortunately, a careful reader must conclude that the McClure (2017) sample of Pagans may be biased, seeing as the researcher seems to have interviewed nonbelievers from comparatively high SES categories, and Pagans from comparatively low SES categories. In the McClure (2017) study, the Pagan population seems to have only been included by the researcher as an example of a population possessing even more limited “cultural capital” than that of the nonbelievers (McClure, 2017). Pagans, then, exist in this study as an even more highly-marginalized foil for nonbelievers, who seem to represent the researcher’s primary interest. Furthermore, Pagans are also presented as an exemplar of poor or pathological stigma-management strategies, particularly defensive othering, that individuals may resort to if they are lacking in “cultural capital.” (McClure, 2017, p. 339). One might speculate that the defensive othering noted in
this particular Pagan population might have as much to do with disproportionate economic disadvantage of the particular sample.

After taking note of the serious aforementioned issues, this study does have some utility in providing a voice for the way that stigma can lead to unique family struggles for Pagans in their personal lives, including concerns regarding losing custody of children, and the particular difficulties of being Pagan in a social context dominated by Evangelical Christianity (McClure, 2017). However, the reader should bear in mind that the group of Pagans sampled in McClure (2017) appear to be significantly less advantaged and somewhat less educated than typical Pagans in United States communities.

Two Primers for Clinicians

Two articles, Yardley (2008) and Moe et al. (2013) provide primers for counselors and social workers in order to improve multicultural competency. While neither of these is an empirical study, they are useful integrative literature reviews for counselors seeking to improve their overall competence particular segments of the Pagan population.

Yardley (2008) prepared an article titled, “Social work practice with Pagans, Witches, and Wiccans: Guidelines for practice with children and youths,” which was published in Social Work. Yardley’s work is more focused on that particular professional discipline, but nevertheless provides a valuable resource for any clinician working with Pagan or Wiccan children or adolescents. The primer contains recommendations for improving multicultural competence and understanding some of the important features that may be present in Pagan families. The author also offers a valuable and relatable case example.
Moe et al. (2013) wrote an article titled, “Wicca and Neo-Paganism: A primer for counselors,” published in *Journal of Professional Counseling, Practice, Theory, & Research*. This particular article is aimed more at professional counselors, and offers a more current review of the literature than what is presented in the Yardley (2008) article. Moe et al. (2013) provide more general recommendations for working with Pagans and Wiccans of all ages, and the authors also mention that “issues pertaining to a sense of alienation from family of origin may be common as well.” (p. 46). The authors further underscore some of the findings of the qualitative studies, advising that “counselors should be aware that Wiccan and Neo-Pagan clients may be cautious about disclosing or discussing their beliefs… and that this does not signify an unhealthy level of paranoia.” (p. 45). The potential issues identified in Moe et al. (2013) are generally consistent with those mentioned in the studies explored previously.

**Integrative Overview of Existing Studies**

Although the study has a number of significant shortcomings, Crowley (2017) is the only extant piece of empirical literature to specifically focus on the experiences of Pagans in counseling and psychotherapy. Harris et al. (2016) provided a helpful qualitative exploration of Pagan identity development as it appears in college students, and this resource would be particularly helpful for clinicians working in college counseling centers with Pagans. It is unfortunate that none of the participants in the Harris et al. (2016) study had ever personally been in counseling or psychotherapy. Tejeda (2015) provided two studies, one qualitative and one quantitative, examining how Pagans experience stigma in the workplace. The Tejeda (2015) study is invaluable in providing a careful examination of how Pagans experience
stigma in their professional lives. As for the personal lives of Pagans, the McClure (2017) article examines the stigma faced by Pagan parents in areas of the United States that are not friendly to these religious beliefs, such as the “Bible Belt” of the United States.

Finally, a few key articles provide helpful overviews to counselors or psychotherapists who are seeking to improve their competency. Yardley (2008) provides an overview of Paganism intended for social workers seeking to better serve Pagan and Wiccan youth. Moe et al. (2013) offers a more broad-based primer intended for counselors, with an emphasis placed on the origins of Wicca and Paganism, terminology, population traits, common beliefs, and counselor awareness. A comparable summary overview of Pagan beliefs and traits is beyond the scope of this study, but these two primers are a very useful resource to clinicians and researchers alike.

**Theoretical Overview**

Pagan individuals frequently struggle with how to present that identity to others outside Pagan communities—whether that be to family, coworkers, or counselors and psychotherapists (Berger et al, 2003; Harris et al, 2016). To that extent, we must search more broadly to find applicable theories that will help shine a light on the needs of this particular marginalized group.

Concealable stigmatized identity (CSI) is a concept developed by Quinn & Chaudoir (2009) to describe how certain stigmatized identities, including but not limited to HIV status, non-heterosexual orientation, and others, are experienced and managed by those who carry them. Pagans are able in almost every case to pass as non-Pagan, or to cover this aspect of their identity, both of which are common strategies used to manage the stigma of other CSIs.
Seeing as the Pagan identity is generally a stigmatized one, the theory of CSI is likely to be applicable to Pagan individuals and how the ways they may manage this identity within a counseling or psychotherapy situation. Previous studies such as Crowley (2017) have only applied CSI concepts to Pagan individuals in a very limited way.

As we have demonstrated previously, there is a high level of intra-group variance for Pagans, as they differ greatly from one another in beliefs, values, and strategies utilized for identity management across different areas of their lives (Pike, 2005). Therefore, theories about concealable stigmatized identities (CSI) are likely to be applicable to this population (Crowley, 2017), so this theory will be used to inform the development of an interview protocol for the current study. Precisely which strategies are deployed for managing a Pagan identity, whether that be covering, passing, and others, often depends largely on the Pagan individual’s context including their personal comfort with individual family members and particular coworkers knowing that they are Pagan (Crowley, 2017; Harris et al., 2016).

Furthermore, due to the high level of intra-group variation, it may not be possible to develop one comprehensive theoretical model to describe Pagan experience. As noted in the previous chapter, one Pagan expressed a very strong negative reaction to any attempt to identify characteristics or qualities of the “typical Pagan” (Survey 2425, in Berger et al., 2003, p. 226). Regardless, the current study aspires to identify some common themes, and to build on theories developed from work with similar populations. These theories of CSI are particularly related to ways that Pagan individuals manage stigmatized identities and might be applicable to guiding phenomenological interview questions for this population.

Finally, we will consider analytical psychology, a particular theoretical approach that many Pagan individuals themselves seem conversant with and have used to describe their
experience (Waldron & Waldron, 2004). Despite decades of critique directed toward Jungian approaches in counseling and psychotherapy, analytical psychology was chosen due to the characteristic affinity that Pagan individuals themselves seem to display for this particular theory (Crowley, 2017; Waldron & Waldron, 2004). In the interests of representing an emic perspective, if the Pagan community feels that a particular approach is suited to describe their experience, it behooves a sensitive researcher to also become familiar with that theory, rather than dismissing it due to prior critiques or lack of empirical research.

Seeing as research on Pagan identity is quite sparse, drawing from literature from broader topic areas is required to provide the necessary theoretical framework to guide the interview protocol. Unfortunately, there is no single theory that adequately explains the experiences of Pagans in counseling or psychotherapy. Therefore, the current research questions will be informed by critical theoretical concepts adumbrated by prior researchers (Crowley, 2017; Harris et al., 2016).

**Theories of Oppression and Minority Stress**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, these theories of oppression and marginalization illustrate that individuals in marginalized groups experience minority stress, which leads to a whole range of adverse outcomes. (Meyer, 1995, 2003). Minority stress applies to Pagans as well, particularly in the East Coast of the United States or other areas of the country where the local community’s outlook might be more oppressive to Pagan individuals, or where there might be few if any other Pagans locally.

Arrendondo (2008) provides an important emphasis on the ways that worldview can affect the levels of stress experienced by a minority population, underscoring the role that
locus of control and belief about personal responsibility play in the well-being of marginalized individuals (p. 341-2). To this end, Arrendondo (2008) recommends exploring how these cultural or spiritual beliefs play out in the client’s culture or community in order to better appreciate the unique qualities of that worldview.

The revised social justice competencies presented by Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler & McCullough (2016) indicate an increasing sensitivity in the counseling field to the emerging salience of intersectionality. Therefore, the researcher will continue to be aware of ways that gender, race, and sexual orientation impact the marginalization and stigma experienced by Pagan individuals. An awareness of intersectionality is essential to understanding how marginalization and oppression operate in contemporary society (Ratts et al, 2016). For instance, a Pagan who identifies as LGBTQ may face difficulties if the only Pagan group in their area has more heteronormative values. Or a Pagan who is Black may face a disproportionate amount of stigma for being Pagan, as compared to a person from another race.

Certain identities are stigmatized in different ways depending on the cultural context. Identity as a Pagan is concealable, and as demonstrated by other researchers, is stigmatized. The theory of concealable stigmatized identity provides an invaluable theoretical construct to understand how the concealability of some identity, such as being Pagan, is used to do social damage control around that identity.

**Concealable Stigmatized Identity (CSI)**

Per the findings of other researchers described above, being Pagan in certain contexts meets the criteria of being a concealable stigmatized identity (CSI) in both the United States
and the UK (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Harris et al., 2016). According to Quinn & Chaudoir (2009), concealable stigmatized identities may be modeled in a number of ways and engage in a number of processes to manage those CSIs.

Quinn & Chaudoir (2009) also make an important note of the impact of associative stigma on those with CSIs, and ways that the CSI can cause a feeling of stigma that transfers to family members or friends (p. 635). Associative stigma may be a more important concept when examining Pagans in the context of their non-Pagan family members and friends. On the other hand, to appear likely that there may be some additional motivation on the part of Pagans to cover or pass in order spare their loved ones from the associative stigma of being close to a Pagan themselves.

Further dimensions of CSIs explored in Quinn & Chaudoir (2009) include idiosyncratic nature of the CSI, anticipated stigma, identity centrality, identity salience, psychological distress, and cultural stigma. In general, the findings indicated that, “anticipated stigma, identity centrality, salience of identity thoughts, and cultural stigma were all positively related to psychological distress.” (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009, p. 641). The full model developed by Quinn & Chaudoir (2009) is too complex and nuanced to expound on fully here. However, based on prior research on Pagans, the particular dimensions of anticipated stigma and cultural stigma seem most likely to factor into how Pagans perceive stigma, and the ways that Pagans may negotiate that stigma with them in a counseling or psychotherapy session. These particular concepts in the CSI model will be explored as they relate to the content disclosed in participant interviews in the current study.
**Jung and the Pagan community**

According to Waldron & Waldron (2004), the neo-Pagan movement has been deeply informed by Jung’s theories, which provided a key framework for early neo-Pagan authors such as Margot Adler, Vivienne Crowley, and Starhawk. In fact, the mainstreaming of certain Jungian concepts into the public awareness during the 1960s and 1970s provided the first framework for the earliest Pagan explain the key ideas of their religion in popular books and writings (Crowley, 2017; Waldron & Waldron, 2004). Therefore, seeing as Jungian concepts have a deeply-interwoven history with some Pagan ideas, particularly those concepts relating to symbolism and the symbolic, and we would do well to include them in the theoretical overview.

Jung’s theory builds on classical psychoanalytic theory, and has a reputation for taking these psychoanalytic concepts in a more transpersonal and spiritual direction (Hall & Nordby, 1973). The theory emphasizes such concepts as archetypes, collective unconscious, Self, and shadow, which are often used in Pagan discourses (Hall & Nordby, 1973; Waldron & Waldron 2004). According to Waldron & Waldron (2004), “Jungian understanding of the nature and function of the symbolic has proved to be an invaluable model for the legitimization of Pagan rituals, mythology, and historical narrative. By giving priority to the psychic significance of symbols that have arisen from the collective unconscious, neo-Paganism has attained a means of legitimating Pagan ritual outside of empirical history, while at the same time ensconcing itself within the framework of a coherent and relatively respectable psychological and epistemological framework. In this, it has found a contemporary authentication for Pagan beliefs and practice.” (p. 33).
With a sensitivity toward the importance of Jung’s theory as a sort of Rosetta stone that allows their experiences to be communicated to others outside the community, this theory will be applied as it is relevant to the narratives of the participants in the current study. However, this will be done with a mindful eye toward the significant shortcomings of the theory of analytical psychology.

**Limitations of Analytical Psychology**

The theories of Carl Jung have come under a great degree of scrutiny in recent decades on a number of fronts, from their lack of empirical support to their sometimes broad-stroked approach to multicultural narratives that lacks the nuance of more contemporary multicultural theories (Hall & Nordby, 1973; Young-Eisendrath & Dawson, 2008). Jung is often presented as a theorist who adopts a comparative and etic approach that glosses over distinctions between cultures in favor of emphasizing similarities; these similarities are then condensed into archetypes to be found in dream content or other cultural narratives, which may miss an appreciation for each idea or myth in the fullness of its own particular cultural context. (Young-Eisendrath & Dawson, 2008). Were it not for the importance of Jungian ideas or analytical psychology for Pagan groups themselves, these theories would likely not be included in a study such as this one. Perhaps the marginal nature of Jungian theories and analytical psychology, from the perspective of mainstream counseling or psychology, could be indicative of a parallel process to the marginalization experienced by Pagans.
Integration of Theories

The theoretical construct of CSIs, the concept of marginalization, and the larger frameworks of critical psychology and analytical psychology provide a number of potential lenses that may prove to be helpful for understanding the ways that Pagans may manage their identities both in their routine daily lives, and within the particular context of the counseling or psychotherapy situation.

Marginalization and CSIs together offer a more etic framework from which we may understand the experiences of Pagan individuals in counseling and psychotherapy, as a more pronounced instance of the same phenomenon that Pagans encounter in their daily interactions with coworkers, friends, and others in the community at large. Perhaps models developed by studying individuals with other CSIs, such as the model suggested by Quinn & Chaudoir (2009), could be applicable for Pagans as well. This model provides more detail on the various management strategies individuals use for managing CSIs and marginalization.

Analytical psychology, or Jungian psychology, offers a unique perspective from which to understand the Pagan psychotherapy experience in a more emic light. It is uniquely fortunate to be able to borrow directly from a psychological theory that many key Pagan authors appear to self-identify with, be conversant with, or hold in high regard in some way (Waldron & Waldron, 2004). It is quite likely, therefore, that the contemporary Jungian or analytical psychology literature might also provide useful conceptual language to describe how Pagans experience successful counseling or psychotherapy, if the research participants happen to be conversant with such terminology themselves (Crowley, 2017; Waldron & Waldron, 2004).
**Research Questions**

The research questions for the current study are as follows. How do Pagans encounter counseling or psychotherapy? How do Pagans navigate their identity and beliefs in a counseling or psychotherapy environment? How do Pagans feel that counseling or psychotherapy could improve in serving their unique needs?

The theoretical concepts of multiculturalism and marginalization, CSIs, and the theoretical milieu of analytical psychology, will provided the added context and potential areas of exploration to extend these research questions into a semi-structured interview protocol.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Introduction

Due to the limited nature of prior research regarding Pagan experiences in counseling and psychotherapy, an exploratory qualitative approach was utilized for the current study. The current approach and methodology was built along the lines of the approach taken in the Crowley (2017) study, while being also informed by the general phenomenological research methodology suggested by Wertz (2005) for counseling research. Combining the general approach to phenomenology for counseling research as presented by Wertz (2005), the project will also be informed by social justice considerations that are functionally inseparable from a sensitivity to the worldview of the individual in their unique cultural context (Arrendondo, 2008). The approach will retain a particular sensitivity to and empathy with the lived world or worldview of the research participants. Such an attitude is particularly important for any research involving with this population, seeing as Pagans in general have a characteristically animistic worldview (Berger et al., 2003), and exploring the intersection between these individual spiritual beliefs and the psychotherapy environment is likely to garner the most useful new knowledge for clinicians and future researchers along these similar or parallel lines of inquiry.

Wertz (2005) recognizes some of the difficulties posed by humanistic qualitative phenomenology in the post-modern world. In light of the criticisms of the humanistic qualitative approaches offered by St. Pierre (2014), a general narrative interpretive phenomenological approach will be applied. Admittedly, there are a number of sacrifices
made by adopting a less precise philosophical framework to the project, and by choosing not to adopt or venture deeply into more recent methodological developments in the realms of qualitative research or even postqualitative research, as described by St. Pierre (2014). However, it is notable that narrowing down the precise philosophical underpinnings of one’s methodology does not appear to have been necessary for prior researchers, including Crowley (2017), to have achieved useful data in their studies. For Harris et al. (2016) as well, a mishmash of narrative, interpretive, and other qualitative approaches yielded consistent and valid data, as other features of the research design served to adequately serve as check to validity. Therefore, by maintaining a primary fidelity to the lived world of the research participants, and the appropriate attitude first and foremost, postmodern and humanistic sensibilities in qualitative research can be reconciled in practice if not in philosophy. Therefore, the insights of post-qualitative research, as articulated by St. Pierre (2014), was applied to the data interpretation in the event that traditional phenomenological inquiry is found to be insufficient by the content or idiosyncratic worldviews of these participants. The approach is one of narrative phenomenology.

As Wertz (2005) describes it, “Phenomenological research requires an attitude of wonder that is highly empathic. The researcher strives to leave his or her own world behind and to enter fully… into the situations of the participants.” (p. 172). The empathic attitude is a key feature of the phenomenological interview strategy for the current study, and the choice of a semi-structured interview protocol allows for interviewer and participant to explore other areas of discourse if they are discovered to hold more salient meaning regarding the intersection of the participant’s lived experience as Pagan and their experience of the psychotherapeutic encounter. The narrative content of the interviews serves to
counterbalance the potentially idiosyncratic nature of the lived experiences the participants share.

A list of the three proposed research questions was provided at the end of the previous chapter. Questions covered the experience generally, methods of navigating identity and beliefs, and areas for improvement for counselors or psychotherapists working with Pagan individuals.

**Participants**

The sample consisted of 7-12 Pagan adults, aged 25 to 65, who have been in counseling or psychotherapy at some time in their life when they identified as Pagan. Exclusion criteria were be adults under the age of 25 or over the age of 65, or who have a history of severe and persistent mental illness. Participants with a history of psychosis were not excluded by default. However, the researcher was prepared to exclude any individual experiencing acute mental distress currently, and to provide any such individuals with an appropriate referral. Individuals included in the study were found to be capable of describing their experiences and feelings verbally during the interview procedure. Participants have identified as Pagan for a minimum of five years, and may be either solitary practitioners or affiliated with a coven or some other group. Participants may or may not have received a diagnosis of a mental health condition, as many individuals in the United States receive counseling without any diagnosis rendered. Also, no protected health information was collected during the interview protocol.

It is worth noting that, while many Pagans consider themselves to be “solitary practitioners,” they still participate and may be involved with larger Pagan communities
through gatherings such as Pagan Pride events, local Pagan alliances, loose-knit regional organizations, or any number of online communities or social media groups. Therefore, it is possible and even likely that Pagans who are not in a coven or tight-knit religious group, who identify as solitary practitioners, may nevertheless be on mailing lists or attendees of regional pride events. Participants who responded to the call for participants may be so-called “solitary practitioners” and participate only in online communities, and not physical groups.

The participants were found to have some level of involvement with or connection to their local Pagan community, as indicated by their being in some type of contact with local Pagan leaders in the region. These Pagan leaders were instrumental in assisting the author in distributing the call for participants, and these leaders were used as the primary check for validity of the participants.

Attempts were made to favor selection of a diverse group of participants where possible, and individuals of different racial backgrounds, SES status, and sexual orientation were intended to be included as well. Given that Pagans are a relatively small community, and members of marginalized groups are an even smaller subpopulation within that group, it was anticipated that it might be difficult to find such individuals. Notably, Harris et al. (2016) acknowledged that they encountered similar difficulties when searching for people of color to recruit for their study of Pagans.

The racial demographics of Pagans, at least according to census data in Berger et al. (2003), provide important context to this disparity. The census data indicates that 90.8% of the Pagans reached in that census were White, .2% were African American or Black, .2% Asian, .9% Native American, .7% Hispanic or Latino, and 2.4% indicated “Other” for their race (Berger et al., 2003, p. 30). Based on data, it appears that Pagans in the United States, at
least in 2003, were overwhelmingly White. Furthermore, according the census data, Pagans are more likely than the general population to be female and to be highly-educated but under-employed, or to be paid less than their educational level would statistically indicate (Berger et al., 2003, p. 32). Additionally, for the purposes of attending to intersectionality issues within the sample, 28.3% of the Pagan census sample identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; other sexual identities or orientations were not measured in the census, most likely because widespread data on them were not being collected in 2003 (p. 28). Other less-comprehensive surveys referenced by Berger et al. (2003) indicate that 39% of Pagans identified as “homosexual [sic]” or “bisexual” (p. 28). This illustrates a much higher proportion of LGBTQ individuals in Pagan communities than in the general population. Therefore, intersectionality between Pagan and LGBTQ identities also presents a potentially fruitful area for exploration in the study, in the event that such identities intersect with Pagan identity within the practice of counseling or psychotherapy.

**Procedure**

Participants for this study were recruited using a strategic snowball sampling method, which is appropriate for a hard-to-reach population (Sadler, Lee, Lim & Fullerton, 2010). Local Pagan leaders in large urban areas along the East Coast of the United States were contacted personally and given an explanation of the research project, including a copy of the call for participants. Those leaders, at their own discretion, used various local channels to distribute the call for participants to Pagans in their communities who may have had an interest in participating. Going through these regional Pagan leaders is an important step in the recruitment process to ensure the validity of the participant selection, so that identity as a
Pagan is not entirely self-reported. Individuals who had a desire to participate in the current study were then able to contact the researcher directly via a university email address.

After contacting the researcher by email, participants were given a brief preliminary screening prior the interview to ensure that they met all the selection criteria, that they are appropriate for the study, and that they received any mental health referral that may have been ethically required. Participants were contacted to schedule an interview, demographic information was collected during the screening, and phone interviews were individually scheduled at mutually-convenient times. Interviews were conducted via phone, without webcam, to circumvent potential technical and confidentiality issues, and to help the participants to feel a greater sense of privacy.

The audio of the interviews was recorded and stored on a secure, encrypted hard drive, with participants anonymized and the interviewees identified only by number. All initial and follow-up interviews were personally conducted by the researcher. No compensation was offered for participating in the study. The participants were all involved in a data validation processes that involved reviewing their own transcripts and providing clarification as needed.

The interviews were semi-structured, loosely following the interview protocol described in the next section. All interviews were one-on-one between the author and the participant, although some participants were aware of peers who also were participating in the study, and in one instance, those individual discussed their thoughts with one another outside the interviews. Each initial interview ranged in duration from 30 minutes to 90 minutes, depending on the amount of content to be covered. Additional follow-up interviews
were scheduled were possible, and follow-up questions were based on the content of the initial interviews.

Transcription of the interviews was performed by a secure, third-party service with demonstrated experience in performing transcription for similar projects in which the confidentiality of the research data must be protected. These transcripts were individually proofread by the researcher, and all identifying information was removed from any direct quotes prior to adding direct quotes to the final data analysis.

Additional interviews were scheduled as needed until the thematic content reached saturation, to clarify certain material or themes from the initial interview if needed, to explore material in greater depth with the participant, or to provide a check to validity in the later stages of the research process.

**Research Design and Methodology**

Narrative phenomenological methodology provided the framework for the research design of the current study. According to Wertz (2005), a phenomenological orientation is intrinsic to psychology and counseling, and the phenomenological only appears separable from psychology due to certain historical and social trends in the development of the various professions (p. 176). Taking into consideration that the author was trained as a clinician in a program that emphasized phenomenology, this approach and orientation is particularly well-suited for those with clinical skills. As Wertz (2005) describes, “The phenomenological approach emphasizes the importance of returning to psychological subject matter with an open attitude and evoking fresh, detailed descriptions that capture the richness and complexity of psychological life as it is concretely lived.” (p. 176). Descriptive
phenomenology, including a sensitivity to narrative content and how that narrative is experienced, was used to guide the protocol, and the overall attitude toward the participants during the interviews was one of curiosity. (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Giorgi, 1989). Within the Duquensque school, phenomenological research methods in psychology were fine-tuned and a high level of precision was developed in describing the correct attitude of the researcher needed to collect valid and meaningful data (Giorgi, 1989; Wertz, 2005).

Interviews were conducted according to a semi-structured process and with a narrative phenomenological sensibility toward the lived experience and worldview of the individual participants, as suggested by Wertz (2005).

**Instruments and Protocol**

No survey instrument was used; however, future research could benefit from further work reviewing and improving upon the general framework of the Pagan Counselling and Psychotherapy Questionnaire (2015) instrument developed by Crowley (2017, 2014). Because the questionnaire is less personal and intimate than a semi-structured phenomenological interview can potentially be, the utility of this instrument is limited when a rich exploration of the lived experience, and possible identification of an essence, is the desired goal of the research process.

A full interview protocol may be found in the appendix. However, in developing the protocol, three discrete clusters of interview questions branched out from the three primary research questions.

The first research question, “How do Pagans encounter counseling or psychotherapy?” was addressed with queries about how Pagans have chosen to enter into
counseling or psychotherapy, with whom, and what experience of the process was, however brief, including the process of looking for a therapist or counselor if applicable. Queries were also included that explore how Pagans seek safety in counseling or psychotherapy, and about the participant’s general feelings regarding the efficacy of counseling and psychotherapy more broadly. Any past experiences that have shaped these views, positive or negative, was also opened up for exploration and added context.

The second research question was, “How do Pagans navigate their identity and beliefs in a counseling or psychotherapy environment?” This research question was explored with initial questions asking for general information on the participant’s Pagan identity and beliefs. Identity-oriented questions probed for the themes of identity centrality and salience that were identified as key dimensions of the concealable stigmatized identity (CSI) model presented in Quinn & Chaudoir (2009). Belief-oriented questions explored ways that the participant’s beliefs may be felt to be stigmatized, and how those beliefs impacted their experience in counseling or psychotherapy. This arena of discourse also explored any feelings of internalized stigma or fear of pathologization of their beliefs by counselors or psychotherapists. Finally, questions were asked to explore any issues of intersectionality that may be related to other marginalized identities held by that individual participant, in addition to being Pagan. Notably, one significant marginalized identity that emerged during the study was engagement in polyamorous relationship dynamics.

The third and final research question was, “How do Pagans feel that counseling or psychotherapy could improve in serving their unique needs?” This final question enlisted the co-authorship of the participant in suggesting recommendations for counselors and psychotherapists. These answers were used to provide recommendations to counselors, and
to highlight potential areas of improvement in multicultural competence for counselors or psychotherapists who serve the Pagan population.

**Data Analysis**

Data was interpreted according to interpretive phenology, according to the guidelines for phenomenological counseling research presented by Wertz (2005). After being transcribed, meaning-units were coded and identified within the text, according to procedures explained in Wertz (2005) and Giorgi (2003). This was a three-step process, and the coding continued progressively as additional interviews were conducted and additional themes emerged. Some additional meaning-units were identified in later interviews or in follow-up interviews.

Finally, a comprehensive list of the emergent themes were identified through a close reading and thematic coding of the transcripts after all the follow-up interviews had been conducted. These emergent themes were categorized and organized following Giorgi’s three-step methodology (2012). The first step was description of the phenomenon, and this step included a heavy emphasis on a close reading of the narrative content and themes within the transcript data (Giorgi, 2012). The second step was an adoption of what Giorgi (2012) describes as the “transcendental attitude,” which is similar to the bracketing process previously described by other qualitative researchers (Wertz, 2005). In the third step, the researcher used this “transcendental attitude,” coupled with a sort of imaginative variation, to identify and come to an understanding of the essence or essences of the experience.

Per the recommendation of Sohn (2017), thoughtful use of qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) had initially been planned as a tool to assist in the analysis phase and as a
way of keeping track of the transcripts, coding, and emergent themes. Sohn (2017) reports that while phenomenological researchers have been slower than other qualitative researchers to utilize QDAS to organize their data, the software is no less useful for the phenomenological approach as QDAS is for other qualitative methodologies. Sohn’s conceptual article on the applicability of QDAS to phenomenological studies provides a number of useful practical considerations for managing the logistics of data collection, organization, and analysis throughout this project (2017). However, methodological and technological concerns such as confidentiality and as poor options for QDAS on the Mac platform, precluded the use of QDAS in the current study.

A final round of follow-up interviews were conducted during the data analysis process in order to further check for adequate fidelity and validity of the data. Any unclear areas of the transcript were explored further with participants as needed.

**Methodological Limitations**

The current study has a number of limitations. From the sampling perspective, it was be difficult to ensure full validity of the data, as the participants were self-selecting based on the regionally-distributed calls for participants. It is likely to be the Pagans who have had some sort of strong experience with counseling or psychotherapy, be it positive or negative, who responded to this call for participants. It should be kept in mind that this sampling reality may have increased the likelihood of attracting participants with unusually strong positive or negative experiences in counseling or psychotherapy.

Descriptive phenomenology as a research method suffers from a number of limitations, some of which have been explained previously. St. Pierre (2014) provided a clear
and lucid overview of a critical philosophical incompatibility between postmodernist insights and humanistic qualitative research, and the equally problematic nature of both humanistic qualitative and post-qualitative research approaches that are attaining higher levels of popularity in the current decade.

Furthermore, as St. Pierre (2014) also indicates, phenomenology suffers from the shortcomings of language, constraining itself to not only language as a spoken source of knowledge, but spoken language reduced further into written text. This shortcoming is particularly significant when one considers how certain words Pagans use to describe their practice have an associated stigma: “magic,” “coven,” and “ritual” being just a few of these words. Of course, a full overview of the limitations that culture-bound language levies on our perception of the world is beyond the course of this study. However, taking a note of the stigma and pejorative connotations that have been overlaid on many words Pagans use to describe their views and practices can help to separate the essence of their experiences from the stigma applied to them by others via language.

One final methodological limitation derives from the difficulty of hybridizing research methodology, such as narrative approaches with descriptive phenomenological ones. While postpositive views of science identify experience as the original ground for human knowledge, these approaches also tend to contain a certain assumption that experiences from different people do have some uniting essence that can be discovered, if only the investigator is able to arrive at them through reflection on the data (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Wertz, 2005). The assumption of a unitive essence may obscure the diversity in lived experience among a diverse group of individuals, such as Pagans.
Finally, many qualitative approaches encourage the researcher him or herself to be willing to take ownership of their own biases by offering a positionality statement. A further guarantor of the authenticity of the data will be offered by a such a positionality statement by the author of the current study. Due to the tone and personal nature of the statement, it will not be presented in the primary text of this study. The positionality statement may be found in Appendix A, along with the interview protocol. A brief statement of positionality is also included in the discussion section.
CHAPTER 4

Results

Introduction

Overview

Participants contacted the interviewer by email over the period of a month in early 2019 to schedule initial interviews. A total of 12 participants appeared to meet criteria and were enrolled in the study. Of these 12, one was discovered upon entering the interview, to not meet criteria. This individual he had been in counseling only as a teenager, prior to his identifying as a Pagan. Although he indicated on the initial screening that he met criteria for the study, this individual was excluded. The remaining 11 participants met criteria. Initial interviews ranged from 54 minutes to 20 minutes. One additional individual interested in participating contacted the interviewer weeks later, after all the initial and follow-up interviews had all been completed. This individual was not interviewed.

Of the 11 participants, 8 of participants completed follow-up interviews. One participant never replied to the email sent requesting a follow-up interview (participant #7). Another participant replied to the follow-up email weeks later, after all follow-up interviews had already been completed (participant #11). One other participant had a number of scheduling conflicts and did not have any availability within the remaining time slots to complete a follow-up interview before the data analysis phase of the project was scheduled to commence (participant #3). These three initial interviews that did not have follow-ups were still included with the data set. Only the one participant who did not meet criteria (identified as participant #5 in the data set) was excluded. No participants were excluded due to severe
and persistent mental illness or current psychotic symptoms, although one participant in the
data set reported a number of hospitalizations due to suicidal ideation. This participant
provided important data on how they felt as a Pagan experiencing inpatient treatment.

After a review of the initial data and identification of preliminary meaning units,
follow-up questions were composed for each participant and follow-up interviews were
scheduled and conducted over a period of three weeks. These shorter interviews ranged from
11 to 28 minutes in duration. The follow-up questions followed the follow-up interview
protocol included in Appendix B, and questions were derived from salient themes the
participant provided in the initial interview.

All participants documented their informed consent via Qualtrics online survey before
the beginning of the interview, and all were allowed to ask any questions of the researcher at
the beginning of the interview by phone. All interviews, initial and follow-up, were
conducted by phone. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcription was
provided by a service specializing in confidential transcription for research projects. All
transcripts of the interviews were proofed carefully for accuracy and correct terminology by
the interviewer and researcher. A total of 11 hours and 18 minutes of interview data was
collected.

It should be noted that for the data analysis, qualitative data analysis software was not
used. Although the researcher’s university provided a number of different software tools, the
qualitative data analysis options for non-Windows platforms were nonexistent. To use these
data analysis tools, transcripts would have to have been transferred to a non-secure, public
use computer at the university with such software installed.
Therefore, the researcher opted to instead code the data manually, with copies of the printed transcripts and a number of different-colored markers and pens. These annotations were later collected and organized in a spreadsheet to organize the meanings and themes that were emergent across the participant pool. As expected, there was substantial variation among the respondents depending on their own types of experiences in counseling or psychotherapy, including different contexts in which they had experienced psychotherapy. Certain themes also seemed to be connected to age, class, historical experiences with counseling or psychotherapy, and general feelings about psychology or counseling.

**Background of the Participants**

**Age and Gender**

Participants ranged in age from 26 to 54. Eight of the participants were female, and three were male. Of the female participants, one identified as a transwoman. All were white. All participants reported that they resided in the southeastern United States. Of these, five were located in the Raleigh / Durham metro area, two were in rural or semi-rural areas of North Carolina, one was in the Atlanta metropolitan area, one was in a metropolitan area of Tennessee, and one was in a medium-sized town in eastern Texas. The one excluded participant was also located in a rural area of North Carolina.

**Race and Ethnicity**

All participants in this study reported that they were white. The racial breakdown of the sample is, unfortunately, what one would expect based on previously-cited data about the Pagan population, which appears to be highly racially-homogenous, at least in the United
States. Interestingly, participant #10 initially described themselves as “Celtic” and then later said, “Well, I guess I’m Caucasian, white.”

The Pagan census data from 2003 indicates that 90.8% of the Pagans reached in that census were White, .2% were African American or Black, .2% Asian, .9% Native American, .7% Hispanic or Latino, and 2.4% indicated “Other” for their race (Berger et al., 2003, p. 30). Based on data, it appears that Pagans in the United States, at least in 2003, were overwhelmingly white. While the current study sample is also entirely white, this sample does at least appear to be somewhat consistent with those survey findings as to the demographics of the general Pagan population. Furthermore, it may also reflect feelings of the Pagans who identify as “Other” for their race, perhaps finding it preferable to identify with aspects of their ancestry rather than with their race.

**Education and Occupation**

Most participants (n=9) had attended some college; however, this finding may reflect a potential sampling bias toward more literate individuals, a potential bias that is explained in more detail in the limitations section of Chapter 5. The participants reported a range of different careers: a hospital chaplain, a school teacher, a professional psychic, a professional tarot reader, a worker in the IT sector, a jeweler, and a retail worker. One participant reported being in between jobs. One was a graduate student, and one was a current undergraduate student. Another participant was primarily a stay-at-home parent. The breakdown of occupational differences may also indicate a sampling bias towards individuals who had the available time to complete two in-depth research interviews. It is possible that professionals in more demanding careers were unable to find the free time to participate in the study, and as expected, scheduling the interviews proved to be more challenging with the participants.
that had more demanding work commitments. Most participants appeared enthusiastic about the project, seemed to feel that it was important to their community, and seemed to have a high willingness to be flexible when scheduling interviews.

**Settings Where Participants Received Counseling or Psychotherapy**

The participants in the study reported a wide range of counseling and psychotherapy experiences. Most \((n=9)\) reported having some form of outpatient counseling or psychotherapy, often identifying multiple counselors or therapists that they consulted at different times across their lifespan. Several participants reported participating in some type of counseling group \((n=4)\) and several \((n=3)\) reported having had some form of couples or marital counseling. Many \((n=5)\) reported seeing a college counselor either currently or while enrolled in college earlier in their lives. One participant had a psychiatrist who was also their primary therapist. Two participants reported hospitalizations, and one of these participants reported a range of inpatient psychiatric hospitalizations in a number of facilities. Two participants particular described having a progression of brief counseling experiences, but did not feel a particular rapport with any of them. Most participants with multiple counseling experiences described very different experiences in different contexts, and these appeared to vary with the participant’s own life stage, the culture of the area in which the counseling occurred, and the individual approach of the counselor themselves.

**General Themes**

**Salience of Pagan identity**

Participant responses often included reflections on the varying degrees of relevance that Pagan beliefs had to presenting issues. Most participants who identified this theme also
noted that they felt they could not explore deeper content, including those relating to Pagan beliefs, until the crisis was resolved. Participant #13 drew an especially clear distinction between times in her life when discussing Pagan identity was relevant, and times that other concerns were more pressing.

*When I first started with the first therapist, I was having really bad symptoms of depression and hypomania and stuff like that. The immediate focus was on that stuff. My more, I would say, alternative identities about my relationship identity and my religious identity, were not really a priority at that time. Those really came later, because I didn't feel like they were really pressing to talk about... Once I got that under control, I started to first express things that I did. I skirted around using the word Pagan or Wiccan or Thelemite.*

Participant #8 also commented on an early experience in counseling where the presenting concerns were more important than her developing Pagan identity.

*For the college counseling, at that point in my life, I was going through a really difficult depressive episode, where I was beginning some self-harm. So, a lot of my issue with seeking out help at that point was to have the immediate effect of stopping my self-harm. So a lot of it was more focused on me learning how to take care of myself.*

**Negative experiences seeking suitable counselors**

Negative experiences reported included being unable to find an affordable counselor or psychotherapist, and feeling that fee-for-service clinicians were inaccessible. Other negative experiences included perceived judgment from the counselors, or difficulty connecting. Participant #12, a straight male, related the following sentiments about seeking what he perceived to be a Pagan-friendly counselor:

*Oh, it's terrible... There's really-- I think I looked at several hundred in the surrounding area and in [the area] in general. I think of that, I narrowed it down to, like, four potential therapists. The one that I actually chose, that was a Jungian, transpersonal and also has some cross-training in religious studies, meditation, Chinese medicine, things like that, was prohibitively*
expensive and did not take insurance. It was self-pay at more than I could afford.

Participant #9 also felt similar disappointment about being unable to use her insurance policy to pay for sessions with her Pagan-friendly therapist. However, unlike other participants in the study, she was able to afford a few sessions with an individual who was not in her insurance network.

*It was someone that didn't take insurance, so the cost was a factor. She was very generous with her time, you know, scheduling, which is tricky. I think everybody should do therapy every week if they could afford it and go to it, even if you're not struggling with something. But the scheduling, the time and the money piece, is hard.*

Participant #2 shared the following sentiments about how he experienced counseling.

*I guess the beginning is always trying to establish who I am, and develop a rapport, and just kind of give my story to as much as I need to, give them a glimpse into who I am and what's going on with me... There's lots of distrust to male patriarchal figures in my childhood, which may have been why I gravitated more towards Paganism, goddess worship, and that sort of thing... I have really not ever connected deeply enough with a therapist that I've continued with them for more than a couple of months. I have some varying feelings about the way it's practiced as a business.*

**Positive experiences integrating Pagan practices**

Three participants identified especially positive experiences that involved integrating Pagan practices into the counseling or psychotherapy. One indicated that including runes in the psychotherapy, as the primary way the participant understood their own emotions, was
highly helpful. Participant #9 felt that it was helpful to have her own myth and ritual engaged with in the therapy, and she shared the following narrative.

*I came up with like little, sort of, affirmations that I would say in the morning, where I was putting on, basically, like, armor, or shields, or things that I felt would protect me and help me sort of brace for the day. And then, when I got home, I did a little ritual where I would visualize taking off those pieces of armor, and where I could be really, like, comfortable, and let loose. If I needed to cry about being away from my baby, I could do that... So we could sit at the altar together and do some sage to cleanse and saltwater to purify, and I could sit and light some candles and spend time with Inanna [a significant deity to this participant], communing with Inanna, and make that transition back.*

Participant #8 described how her use of runes came up in marriage counseling, and indicated her initial misgivings about needing to explain the runes to the counselor.

*So, what would happen in marriage counseling is a lot of times I would be trying to explain my feelings, and she would be asking questions, and provoking feelings that were coming up for me, and I would visualize them as runes. And I found that difficult to explain to her, how that system is working for me to be able to translate my emotions into these colors and images that I'm seeing. And how am I going to make sense of that, and explain that system to her, if she didn't understand where I was coming from with that?*

Many participants also discussed views of counseling or psychotherapy that were common in the discourse of the Pagan community. This included positive attitudes toward counseling and psychotherapy as being important to one’s overall wellbeing.

**Identity formation processes**

Participants also frequently discussed the processes of identity formation and their own experiences with developing a Pagan identity. Nearly all participants identified feeling more confident in their Pagan identity and spiritual practices at the current time than at an earlier stage of their lives. All participants who reported seeing multiple counselors at
different stages of their Pagan identity development reported that they were much more circumspect about discussing Pagan themes or topics early in their lives. These individuals often reported that they themselves were not ready at that time to disclose their Pagan identity to a counselor, no matter how supportive or validating that counselor or psychotherapist might have been. Participant #2, a veteran who is openly Pagan, reflected on feeling more secure in his Pagan identity in the following words.

*I mean, there are Wiccan chaplains. I think there's like three in the country or something, but it's not very widespread. That's not what most of the time you're going to get, and if you go to the chaplain corps, for most of time you're getting somebody who is very firmly rooted in one of the Judaeo-Christian monotheistic paths... As I've grown older, this has mattered much less to me. I'm more comfortable now where I can be around a person of that kind of religious background, and it doesn't cause me the same kind of anxiety, or worry, or sense of fear of rejection. But when I was a younger person, I was much more concerned about that... But when I was first Pagan, I would hear a vocal outlash against it. So now it's just kind of met with like an eye roll or something.*

**Disclosure of Pagan identity in counseling**

In the follow-up interviews, many participants (n=9) were asked for additional information on their inner processes of deciding what information about their Pagan identities, practices, and beliefs, to share with the counselor or therapist. These themes included ways that participants disclosed their identities, or used covering strategies.

Participant #13 provided a detailed description of her process progressively disclosing her Pagan identity in psychotherapy.

*The second therapist... seemed to be very open and understanding. When I spoke to her about, "oh, here's the other rituals we do, and here's what we celebrate and worship," and all of that, she said back to me, "Oh, this is the framework that you use to understand the world and relate to the world. This is how you view things," and reiterated it to me back in a framework. I first*
started with saying that we do the more Pagan stuff and saying that we do seasonal rituals and celebrate the Earth and celebrate the movement of the sun across the Earth and, in more scientific terms, because I am a scientist at heart. So and then I expanded to, well, "We also work with deities." She's like, "What does working with deities look like?" I'm like, "Well, that's a really fun question." I explain to her that it looks a lot like prayer and meditation and just general ritual, and working with different deities and spirits and ancestors to make your life better.

Based on the variation in the narratives, this process of identity disclosure seems to be highly idiosyncratic, with some participants (n=5) indicating they never disclosed any Pagan identities or beliefs to a counselor, and others describing a wide range different processes they used to assess their own feeling of safety to engage in self-disclosure regarding Paganism with that particular therapist. On one end of the spectrum, Participant #2 reported that he never felt he had enough time with any counselor or therapist to process issues of identity or spirituality. Participant #6 said that she never disclosed anything remotely related to Paganism in her counseling, due to intense concerns about being misunderstood and judged. For participant #6, these concerns appeared to be related to the context of the times, and the “Satanic Panic” phenomenon described in Victor (1993).

Like I said, I didn't really trust him [the counselor]. The other problem there too was not that I would be necessarily embarrassed by it or anything, but I had two young children. And there's always that fear when you have children that if you piss off a therapist, they can make you look bad... like if I said, "Yeah, hey I'm a witch and I do these rituals and stuff," they could be one of those crazies who starts saying, "Oh, she does black magic, you know, sacrifices babies, we gotta take the kids." [laughing] And of course this was in the early 2000s, late '90s.

Other participants reported using a complex process of sharing progressively less-coded terminology to describe their personal practices, communities, identities,
and/or beliefs. For participant #13, this process took several months after her acute symptoms had become manageable. Participant #4 used the strategy of doing substantial research prior to beginning therapy. While participant #4 indicated that she was able to successfully self-advocate, she also came to therapy with assumptions that spirituality might not be on the table for discussion.

*With the first therapist, I had done some reading before I went in to see her about going to see a therapist when you're Pagan, or going to see a therapist when you're not straight, etc. And so I went in with a, "Here are the things I am. I need you to be okay with not treating any of these as the problem," disclaimer, flat out. She was lovely about it. She was fine about it, and it didn't really come up. I think in some ways it might have been more useful if I had felt freer to talk about the squishier things in my life, like religion and spirituality and their impact, their role in my current lost-ness. I think for me personally, I have preconceptions about the limits of psychotherapy and psychotherapy's way of seeing itself, and kind of assumed that therapists wouldn't want to deal with something as nonscientific as religious identity.*

It is likely that factors such as socioeconomic status and access to affordable longer-term psychotherapy constitute an important category of influences on these differences in disclosures and trust level.

**Findings by Research Question**

**RQ1: Experience of Self**

The first research question was, How do Pagans experience themselves in counseling or psychotherapy?

**Marginalization**

Pagans included in the sample, without exception, reported feeling aware of themselves as marginalized in some way (n=12). This is consistent with the theoretical model
of concealable stigmatized identities (CSI) described by Quinn & Chaudoir (2009). A wide range of identity-management strategies were used by some participants. Some participants used varying levels of coded language. Participant #6 avoided discussing Pagan topics entirely. Other participants (n=4) reported taking a calculated risk and being entirely open about their Pagan beliefs with certain counselors from the beginning of the counseling relationship. However, these participants indicated that this openness was possible because they were free to change counselors immediately if the disclosures were received poorly. On the whole, participants with a more mature spiritual identity, and more positive early encounters with counseling in the past, reported having more favorable outcomes with these disclosures.

**Variation by counseling or therapeutic setting**

In general, study participants who had the freedom to self-select counselors or therapists reported much higher levels of satisfaction with the services they received. Participants reported using a range of strategies to identify what they felt were “Pagan-friendly” professionals. Strategies included looking for LGBTQ-friendly therapists, counselors familiar with polyamory, or ones who generally seemed more liberal or described themselves as “open-minded” in marketing materials. Participants who felt they had fewer choices, whether due to geographic area, cost, or other limiting factors, appeared to feel more aware of their marginalization.

This feeling of marginalization appeared to be more pronounced in psychiatric inpatient settings. One participant reported that while trained mental health staff were generally culturally-sensitive and accommodating of his Paganism, the other mental health
staffers were not. Participant #11 shared the following narrative of his experiences with unit staff when receiving inpatient treatment.

*I haven't had [negative] experiences with the therapists and the psychiatrists themselves. But a lot of these places have various aides that... deal with the daily tasks for the patients in inpatient. I remember one time, I was in an inpatient. There was one particular aide that would try to sit down the entire group and would try to preach at the group. The few times I tried to protest it, I was taken out of the group and told I couldn't disrupt them, despite my beliefs. But having spoken to the other people in the group, they were also uncomfortable with it, which is why I spoke up, because of the fact that I knew I wasn't the only one who was uncomfortable with the preaching. Because I spoke up, I was silenced by another one of the aides, which I found to be inappropriate. But what can one do?

However, this same participant also felt that the psychiatric hospital also had certain policies that were helpful to him as a Pagan, including allowing him to have his tarot cards on the unit, and to share his persona spiritual practices with the other patients who were interested in learning more about them.

*I could say all of the hospitals I've been to where my roommates have brought me some of my books, they've also brought me my tarot cards. Every hospital has let me have them. I've always been very well-received with them, where people would, again, ask questions, and several people would ask for readings. In that, I found the mental health system recognized the fact that I found comfort in them, and despite various dogma related to tarot cards and divination, they didn't take them from me.

**Narratives of integrating spiritual practices into counseling**

For participant #11, simply having tarot cards in the psychiatric hospital made the experience more positive. Other participants reported that their beliefs were directly integrated into the counseling or psychotherapy, and all of these participants found this integration of their own practices to be extremely helpful. Participant #8, who used the runes
as a way of symbolizing her own inner experience, shared the following narrative of feeling understood when her own spiritual practice was integrated into individual counseling.

*I went to the first couple appointments, and come to find out, she was a lot more spiritually minded. Even though she didn't identify as Pagan, she had used the runes, and was familiar with the names of each one of them, and kind of a general idea of what each one symbolized. And so I found that really, really helpful, and I was able to actually talk to her about, you know, "Well, I'm having this feeling about this situation with the person in my life, and this is the rune I feel like would be helpful." And she was able to suggest things back to me, like if I'm having trouble with something, "Oh, why don't you use the runes to make this."* 

*I told her I was having trouble with having reoccurring thoughts of bad things happening. Like, having these catastrophic thoughts, or very anxiety-inducing. And she was telling me how I could make a rune that I could use as visualization tool to block some of that. And I was like, "Yeah, of course! Like, why didn't I think of that?" Like, "That's really helpful." So we were able to kind of have that back-and-forth, and she was able to work with me to help me figure out with the system I'm already using internally to help with some of those things.*

**Narratives of feeling misunderstood**

Five different participants reported different narratives of feeling that their Pagan identity or beliefs were misunderstood by a counselor or psychotherapist. Participant #10 put this moment in very simple terms: “I just said "Pagan." That's all I said, and once I got a confused response, I didn't say much else.”

Participant #3 shared ongoing fears of being misunderstood by counselors and psychotherapists, after having negative experiences with a mental health professional early in life, and how that concerns of being perceived as delusional were ongoing for her.

*I realize that you can say to someone, "I'm Pagan," and they may have some idea or no idea what you mean. You can say you're Pagan, and maybe they think you light candles and you worship the Goddess, but then six months into sessions, you whip out something weird and Pagan-y that they haven't heard
of before, and whether or not it's weird to them or whether or not they have actually heard of it, there's that moment of tenseness where you're like, "Is this going to sound crazy? Is this a point in their notes when they write down 'delusional'?" You know, and you hope for the best.

Participant #7 shared an account of having her religious beliefs directly dismissed by a psychiatrist. She shared the following narrative of feeling misunderstood by one mental professional that she consulted during her 20s.

The psychiatrist... she was very, very much on, "You need to have a belief system to help you get through these things," which I think was interesting especially since she was a psychiatrist and an MD. So, and I was very, very reticent. I was like, "I have my own spirituality, thank you. Let's not talk about that." And then, when she says, "Well, why don't you want to talk about it?" I said, "Because I don't think you're going to be terribly open to it," which may have been not the best way to handle it. And I said, "Because I'm Pagan." And she says, "Well, that's a childish religion." She says, "That's religion just to get attention." And I kind of looked at her. I said, "I have been Pagan for—" at that point— "about 19 years." I said, "Really?" She says, "Well, do you believe in fairies and gods and goddesses and things like that?" I said, "Yes." She says, "Well, don't you think that that's a little delusional?" I said, "Do you believe in God?" And she says, "Well, of course I do." I said, "So what's the difference in me believing in fairies and goddesses and you believing in God? Do you see God?" And she said, "Well, I feel his presence." I said, "Well, just because something exists on another realm, it doesn't exist in this realm, it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. It just means that you're not communicating with it."

And I will give her this. It did knock her back on her heels a little bit. And she says, "I've never looked at it that way." And I said, "Well, you might want to try." And then we talked about how there are stories of elemental-type creatures in every society on Earth. There's a reason for that. And so, I think that she was a little more interested in that at that point. But I also explained to her, you know, that we are all made of energy and this is basically physics. And so she kind of got around and she was a little more accepting about it once we talked about the scientific side of things.
Even for participants who did not share narratives of being misunderstood, a concern that one’s spiritual experiences could easily be pathologized was shared by several participants (n=5). Participant #8 summarized her experience of the discourse in the Pagan community surrounding discussing Pagan topics in counseling or therapy.

*I will say also I've had this discussion with another really close friend in the Pagan community, that there is a fear of having your spiritual experiences labeled as nothing more than a disease, and the ultimate of getting committed, and just being locked away, and told you're crazy, and having everything taken away. And this is something that I think is a very deep fear, and maybe not in all Pagans. But certainly those Pagans who maybe have more intense spiritual experiences, that there is a hesitation to reveal everything, for the fear of it causing some sort of really extreme diagnosis, or reaction on the part of the mental health person.*

**RQ2: Identity and Beliefs**

The second research question was, How do Pagans navigate their identity and beliefs in a counseling or psychotherapy environment? This research question assessed perceived stigma and ways that participants attempted to manage that stigma within counseling environments. The question also assessed ways that participants went about choosing their own counselor or psychotherapist, and how participants attempted to find professionals that would be “Pagan-friendly.” None of the participants were directly referred to a “Pagan-friendly” counselor or therapist; all participants in the sample attempted to use their own search strategies for finding an individual they felt would be most likely to understand them. In the instances of a few participants, more immediate mental health concerns took precedence over perceived friendliness towards Paganism. For those participants (n=3) with more acute mental health symptoms at the beginning of the therapeutic relationship, the process of progressive self-disclosures tended to be more prolonged.
Identity management strategies

A number of different identity management strategies are commonly used to manage concealable stigmatized identities (CSIs). Participants frequently described their use of coded language in order to assess the professional’s ability to continuously relate with practices and beliefs that were felt, by the participants, to be further and further outside the mainstream. However, not all participants were able to access longer-term services that allowed for a more substantial level of self-disclosure with a professional that was felt to be new to Paganism, or who might not be fully accepting. Participant #12 provided the following narrative of how she used identity management strategies as she progressively self-disclosed more details about her Paganism.

It took about six months before I sort of decided that, "Okay, we're past all of this shit. Now we can actually talk about my life."... So I first started out with, "Oh, I kind of decided that I'm going to start the process of telling them that I have an alternative spirituality." And that consisted of meditation, some ritual. I didn't name Wicca, Paganism, or Thelema or anything at first. I kind of was like, "Okay, I'll just tell them that I'm in a general organization that takes up a lot of my time. I have some personal Pagan practices." I didn't use the word Pagan, but I used, "These general practices at home where I meditate and think about things and use Tarot as kind of like self-reflection." However you feel about Tarot, that's my kind of safety thing..."Oh, I just use it for self-reflection." Which is true, but it's also for other things. [participant laughing] I just kind of felt out--I'm a pretty intuitive person. I just felt out, like, "Okay, they seem receptive to this. They seem not to be shutting down." The person shared with me they were Jewish. I was like, "Okay, so they are familiar with other religions outside of Christianity. Cool. That's promising." I can relate some of my rituals and say, "Oh, it's kind of like these rituals, or it has a similar flavor or similar intention." They're like, "Oh yeah, that makes sense." Then I just told them, "Also, are you familiar with the word "Wiccan" or "Pagan"? I don't personally identify as Wiccan, but I do have some Wiccan practices, just like I have some practices taken from a lot of places. She's like, "Oh, I actually have a Wiccan friend!" I'm like, "Yes!"
Progressive disclosures and leveraging common ground

Participant #4 provided a helpful narrative of progressive disclosures, and reflected on how this process was mediated by her own anticipation of how the counselor’s identities might make them more or less receptive to certain disclosures of spirituality. In the case of participant #4, themes of spirituality and religion where highly salient and highly interwoven with the presenting issue, including attempts to leverage common ground with the counselor as much as possible.

Right away, some of the circumstances we were talking about were religiously-loaded and were relevant. And right away I needed to be able to at least reveal the general, broad strokes of my religious and spiritual identity. And that was okay, because if that wasn't going to be okay, I would have needed to find a new person. The more intimate and tender details, like my work with Tarot, the specifics of my work with the community I helped lead... that tended to come up at-need when something about that was urgent or present. But every time, every time, there was a moment of-- "Well, I know I was safe before. I know that these other things were okay. How is she going to receive this one? Is this a bridge too far?" It kind of felt like the community I helped lead. "Oh, well, you know, there's common ground there with leadership roles." And while not all communities or churches are the same, working with people, there's a lot of commonality there, and I'm sure that some of these things have happened in her shul as well. And so literally doing Tarot work was a big one, Talking about that and my desires and thoughts around that, because what if she just sees this as just completely invalid, and just doesn't want to tell me?

In general, some participants managed stigma by being incredibly up-front with the counselor or psychotherapist, taking a calculated risk that the participant would either be accepted as-is or would have the freedom to choose a different professional. In other instances, the participant experiences tended to center on bids to build or maintain rapport with the counselor or psychotherapist through a process of increasingly-intimate and increasingly un-coded disclosures of their Pagan practices, beliefs, and identities. Participants
in the data set consistently reported leaving the counseling relationship or seeking out a different professional when those bids were unsuccessful, or felt to be unlikely to be met with acceptance or approval of spiritual beliefs.

**RQ3: Participant Recommendations**

The third research question was, How do Pagans feel that counseling or psychotherapy could improve in serving their unique needs?

All participants (n=11) were consistent in underscoring the innate diversity of Pagans, reporting that the high inter-group variance made suggesting universal recommendations difficult. Participant #4 shared a strong reluctance to offer universal recommendations and underscored the need to ask questions about spirituality in an appropriate way.

*I almost hesitate to say this, because Gods forbid a fundamentalist or a Christian-counselor-therapist gets ahold of this and asks these things in a judgey tone. But, you know, asking things like, “What does the divine-- what does God or the gods look like for you? What’s your relationship to them? What helps you feel connected to them?” To me, would be useful places to start.*

All participants (n=11) felt that counselors or therapists needed to have some basic familiarity of what Paganism was, including some familiarity with core beliefs, principles, and values common to a Pagan population. Most participants felt that the professional should take some responsibility for educating themselves about Paganism, and one participant suggested attending Pagan Pride festivals, rituals, or other cultural events. Participant #9 recommended that counselors have enough awareness of how an animistic worldview is not tantamount to a “mental health red flag.”
I think that it's important to know... what an animistic worldview is. So we might listen to plants or animals or spirits of the deceased or spirits of the land or animal spirits and get messages. I could see how that, if you weren't familiar with that as a tool, or even ceremonial magicians who talk to angels and demons and some of these beings that interact with them, it could seem like a mental health red flag. Literally, this is a healthy part of a spiritual practice, but I think that having some understanding of that worldview would be helpful.

Several other recommendations were common among the sample. Several participants (n=4) included a need for better awareness and sensitivity training for counselors as well as other staff members who have been working in psychiatric facilities. Participants felt consistently that counselors should not engage in proselytizing or evangelical activities, and that they should be cautious about divulging their own religious or spiritual identity. Several participants (n=4) shared that they would be inclined to avoid a counselor who identified as faith-based, or who had Christian books or quotes displayed prominently in their office. Several participants (n=5) identified wanting better ways of finding Pagan-friendly professionals in the community, citing difficulty finding insurance-based professionals who were also Pagan-friendly or Pagan-aware.

Other recommendations provided by participants including better insurance credentialing for counselors or therapists already familiar with the Pagan community and worldview. Also, participants reported wanting easier ways to identify Pagan-friendly therapists and counselors, including better resource lists maintained by local Pagan alliances or groups. Some participants (n=3) felt that Pagan-friendly professionals should take the initiative in interfacing with community leaders and presenting themselves as resources. Most participants agreed that counselors or therapists should take the initiative to educate themselves about Paganism or attend Pagan events to become familiar with the community.
Conclusion

Participants reported a wide range of themes in the data set.

Findings from Research Question 1 yielded a range of positive and negative experiences that participants had in psychotherapy, including a self-reflection process about what factors might be responsible for those experiences. Factors identified included the participant’s own identity formation process, availability of perceived Pagan-friendly professionals, and what level of relevance the Pagan identity had with respect to the current presenting problem for that participant.

Research Question 2 provided information and narratives about identity management strategies, including coded language, strategies such as covering and passing that were common in managing CSIs, and particular beliefs or practices that participants felt more or less concern disclosing. Topics such as ritual, spirit and deity work, polyamory, sacred sexuality, and divination were considered particularly fraught among the participant pool, and coded language was often used to describe core Pagan practices. Also, coded language choices such as “community,” “study group,” and “meetup” were frequently substituted for words like “coven” and “ritual,” to reduce the perceived bias participants felt such terms carried. Participants noted they used these strategies in daily life frequently as well.

Research Question 3 led to a number of important recommendations. These participant recommendations included implications for counselor competence, including better awareness and sensitivity training for counselors as well as other staff members who have been working in psychiatric facilities. Other recommendations provided by participants including better insurance credentialing for counselors or therapists familiar with the Pagan community and worldview. Also, participants reported wanting easier ways to identify
Pagan-friendly therapists and counselors, including better resource lists maintained by local Pagan alliances or groups. Some participants (n=3) felt that Pagan-friendly professionals should take the initiative in interfacing with community leaders and presenting themselves as resources.

These recommendations for advocacy, outreach, and continuing education for professionals are discussed in more detail in the final chapter of this study.
CHAPTER 5

Discussion

Summary of Research

This study has a number of findings that were summarized in detail in the previous chapter. Most participants reported that they had multiple experiences in counseling or therapy, that they used a range of strategies for trying to present their Pagan identities and beliefs in different terms, and most identified several areas of improvement and recommendations for counselors working with Pagans.

Pagans in the study experienced themselves in counseling or psychotherapy in a wide variety of different ways. Both positive and negative experiences, past and present, were reported in the interviews. Most felt comfortable, sometimes after many sessions, with disclosing their Pagan identity in some form, and most seemed to feel that they would seek out a different counselor or therapist if they did not seem receptive to discussing this in an open and nonjudgmental way. However, most participants expressed frustration at trying to find a counselor or therapist that was both “Pagan friendly” and was able to accept their insurance plan or offered rates that felt affordable to the participant.

Pagans navigate their identity and beliefs in a counseling or psychotherapy environment in a similar way to how they navigate concerns of identity and beliefs in other arenas of their lives. Participants described a sort of “feeling-out process” where they started out with coded or vague language to test if the therapist would express any judgments, and revealed more details of their religious practices or beliefs gradually, as rapport was built. Some never felt they were able to fully disclose their identities or beliefs to the counselor or
therapist, while other participants were reassured by the therapist’s own self-disclosure of spiritual or nonmainstream religious identities or practices. Many (n=5) had had Jewish therapists, and of these, many (n=3) felt that the Jewish therapist would be more likely to understand the marginalization that Pagans experience as a spiritual minority. Some other participants, most generally those who were older, who had been in counseling before, or who were more settled in their Pagan identities were more direct.

Participants in this study made a range of different suggestions about how counselors or therapists could improve in serving the unique needs of Pagan clients. A few of these recommendations were contradictory, however. While some participants (n=3) indicated that it would be beneficial for counselors to ask more questions of a Pagan client, other participants cautioned about asking too many questions, expressing concerns about voyeurism (n=2) and reservations about the intentionality of excessive questions (n=3).

Participants who had felt that the counselor had a genuine interest, or who saw that the counselor took time outside the session to engage in research on their own, were inclined to view such behaviors positively. Participants had mixed views about if they were obligated to educate the therapist or counselor, with some feeling glad that the counselor was interested, and others feeling that they were paying for the therapist to also take time outside the session to educate themselves. Participant #12 was especially interested in counselors or therapists taking time to do their own research on relevant topics presented within session:

_That would make an excellent segue for a follow-up session. Like, oh, "By the way, I did look at John Dee, he was an interesting fellow in the court of..." You know, just random stuff like that, that's not the exact thing. Like, "oh yes, I just read Liber Israfel, excellent. Whoa, that's weird." Something that's still relatable, that bridges, that shows that willingness to meet the client within their own practices, I think that would really go a long way. Or, I've looked at the Tao De Ching. Whatever. Maybe it's not the exact thing. I don't think_
there's an expectation for you to read the exact book I'm reading, but I think even just skimming Wikipedia about something is a great life-preserver or a hand reaching out, that I think would go a tremendously long way with a Pagan or non-mainline spiritual practice... I don't think there's even an expectation to even use the terms properly, but I think that that thousand-yard overview would really go a long way in building that client/therapist relationship. That is a way of demonstrating that not only is there not judgment there, there's a bit of genuine curiosity and willingness to take the time outside to learn about something.

Implications

Implications for theory based on findings

The model of Concealable Stigmatized Identities (CSI) provided by Quinn & Chaudoir (2009) applies in many important ways to Pagans, but not in all respects. This model was developed to describe stigmatized identities such as HIV status and sexual orientation, but this model fails to describe the particularities of why the Pagan worldview may be stigmatized, including the attitudes of some majority religions towards Paganism on the one hand, and bias against Paganism due to the perceptions of its superstition on the other. One participant, a graduate student in engineering, reported carefully concealing her Pagan identity and practices due to the secular expectations of her graduate program. Covering and passing strategies were described by most participants in their daily lives, including describing themselves using words that they perceived to carry less stigma than “Pagan.” Also, they described themselves using language that they felt the counselor or therapist was more likely to respond to favorably, including “meditation” as a way of describing ritual, “meet up with friends” to describe a Pagan gathering or meeting, and so on.

Existing theories may be adapted further to help describe Pagans and their disclosure decisions and processes in psychotherapy more accurately. In fact, there may be a need for a
new model to describe how Pagans and other spiritual minorities manage their disclosure processed to others.

Jungian theory also provides some pre-existing language that many Pagans may already identify with (Waldron & Waldron, 2004; Crowley, 2017). For instance, several participants (n=3) identified “Jungian” as a term or theoretical orientation they believed to be indicative that the counselor or therapist would have a better insight into their problems or worldview. Unfortunately for those Pagans seeking counseling services, this theory is not included in the theories coursework most counselor education programs.

**Implications for Counselor Education**

The importance for counselors to have an appropriate level multicultural counseling competency cannot be overstated. Often, in counselor education programs, multicultural counseling courses place an emphasis on racial and gender differences, yet spend minimal time instructing counselors-in-training on how to approach issues of spirituality and religion in counseling sessions (Rose et al., 2008; McVittie & Tilopouios, 2006). However, there is a need for greater understanding of how concealable stigmatized identities (CSIs) are managed by clients, who may not disclose such identities unless directly asked, or unless they feel they are already communicating with an insider of some type. Unfortunately, access to a counselor who is already an “insider” in the Pagan community, or who identifies with a relatively obscure theoretical orientation, might not be realistic for all Pagan individuals. Additionally, small communities such as the one described here present a number of potential boundary and ethical issues for counselors.

Including a brief unit on Jungian theory in the “theories and techniques” course of counselor education programs could help counselors in better approaching Pagan clients.
Several participants mentioned looking for Jungian orientation or familiarity as a marker when seeking a counselor or therapist. Although Jung’s ideas seem to have disappeared from curricula in counselor education in recent years, it remains the case that Jungian ideas are common among the Pagan community as a framework for structuring their own experiences (Crowley, 2017; Waldron & Waldron, 2004). Familiarity with Jung can provide a model for counselors when conceptualizing how Pagan clients interact with spiritual realities, how they use myth, and how they engage in an animistic worldview. Furthermore, many Pagans already are familiar with Jungian terminology and often use Jungian or neo-Jungian concepts themselves, including several (n=4) in the current study.

Understanding how certain factors can be off-putting or become deterrents to the therapeutic relationship for Pagans may be helpful. For instance, a number of participants (n=4) noted that they would be less likely to disclose Pagan identity or practices if the counselor had Christian books or Christian quotes made visible on the wall. Unfortunately, this aversion to Christianity seems more common for Pagans who have grown up in Christian households where they felt they were not accepted as having a different spiritual orientation or identification. This may be viewed as transference, or it may be viewed as internalized stigma. In whatever description, counselor education programs can help their students understand the complexities of religious or spiritual self-disclosure across their degree programs.

**Limitations of Research Design and Method**

One potential validity concern has to do with the geographic distribution of the sample. It is likely that cultural variation within the United States, including the stigma that Pagans themselves anticipate facing from the public and from counselors, has an impact on
the perspectives of the individuals. Also, most individuals (n=7) reported receiving
counseling or psychotherapy at some point in their lives outside of the Southeastern United
States, making it difficult to determine if the described anti-Pagan bias might be regional in
nature. To further complicate matters, there was also a very wide spread of time during
which the study participants received counseling, with some of the older participants having
received counseling as a teenager themselves in the 1980, which was the time during which
the Satanic Panic was in full force (Victor, 1993). Therefore, to that end, it is difficult to
determine how much of the prejudice the study participants experienced differs due to to
regional cultural differences, how much is primarily a historical artifact, and how much
persists into the current day.

Another potential validity concern has to do with the broad range of settings in which
the study participants received counseling or psychotherapy. The current study included
participant experiences in college counseling centers, private practice psychotherapy,
marriage therapy, inpatient mental health, a range of structured and unstructured counseling
groups, and even experiences that individuals had in counseling or psychotherapy as
teenagers. The study also included experiences searching for a psychotherapist, even when
the participant did not choose to enter into a counseling relationship. Participants on the
whole reported much more positive experiences when they were able to select a counselor or
therapist according to the participant’s own criteria from a broad selection of profiles.
Participants who were forced to go to counseling by parents, who were not able to choose a
professional they felt was “Pagan-friendly,” or who received inpatient treatment reported
much less positive experiences with feeling understood as Pagan. One participant with a
military background indicated that he found it virtually impossible to find a Pagan-friendly
therapist within his budget. Future studies can benefit from taking socioeconomic status and local cultural factors into account, as these factors appear likely to account for a significant amount of variance in Pagan experiences.

Finally, the member checking process has a number of limitations. Participants were self-selecting and chose to participate in the study without compensation or reimbursement. They also were not required to disclose any identifying information, such as legal names or addresses. It is possible, although unlikely, that individuals who were not authentically Pagan may have been able to make it through the member-checking process. However, the researcher did not verify or disclose the identities of study participants to local Pagan leaders who helped with the distribution of the call for participants document. In this instance, confidentiality and protection of participants’ identities was deemed more important than thoroughness of member checking. It is also possible that participants who had negative experiences in counseling or psychotherapy were more motivated to participate in the study, as a way of helping to overcome the stigma that they felt themselves to have experienced.

**Implications for Future Research and Practice**

This study has raised a number of interesting possibilities for future research. First, the participants’ answers revealed a range of developmental differences in their own comfort with presenting Pagan identities and practices to counselors or therapists. Several study participants also introduced polyamory as a topic they also felt hesitant to bring up in therapy. Some participants mentioned additional difficulty with bringing Pagan interests into college counseling contexts due to their own uncertainty. Additional research might also be conducted with mental health professionals themselves to determine areas of competence
when working with Pagan individuals, or being able to differentiate culturally-normative Pagan beliefs from psychotic or schizoid symptoms.

Participants often stated that they viewed their own identity as Pagan differently depending on their age. Some of the older study participants—those in their 40s and 50s—indicated that they were more likely to be up-front about their Pagan identity and practices with a new counselor. Others who had seen multiple counselors or therapists indicated that they were more up-front with their Pagan identities and practices. Others described a stepwise, measured process of disclosing Pagan identity. As mentioned previously, those who had more freedom to select their own counselor or psychotherapist from among many options were more likely to openly disclose Pagan identities or beliefs, likely due to the individual having conducted their own vetting process before selecting that counselor or therapist.

A discourse analysis examining how Pagans engage in conversations about mental health could also be helpful. Nearly all participants (n=10) shared thoughts about certain ideas that were common in the Pagan community surrounding mental health and psychotherapy. Among these were the importance of counseling or psychotherapy for general wellness (n=7) and generally positive views about the helpfulness of psychotherapy. A study of discussion board postings in Pagan groups on social media might reveal more about how fears of misdiagnosis and other concerns feature in Pagan spaces.

Another topic that many interviewees introduced was that of polyamory, which is the practice of consensually maintaining multiple simultaneous sexual or romantic relationships (Kleese, 2014). Another article on this topic indicates, “Polyamory describes a form of relationship where it is possible, valid and worthwhile to maintain (usually long-term)
intimate and sexual relationships with multiple partners simultaneously.” (Haritaworn, Lin & Kleese, 2004). Polyamorous relationships can vary widely, with the terms depending on the inclinations, consent, and needs of the individuals involved. Current discourse on polyamory seems to take a poststructuralist approach and differentiates polyamory from constructs of sexual orientation, noting that some individuals see polyamory as a part of their sexual orientation, while others see polyamory as a lifestyle choice (Kleese, 2014).

No matter how we conceptualize polyamory, it is evident that polyamory is common in the Pagan community (Berger et al., 2014). In the current study, many participants shared a hesitancy about disclosing polyamorous arrangements, practices, or views with counselors (n=3). Since polyamory were not included in the interview protocol, it is possible that more than 3 study participants were engaged in or had been engaged in polyamory. However, the anticipated stigma of polyamory seemed to be an additional item of concern for study participants. Some study participants indicated that they were hesitant to discuss their polyamory just as they were hesitant to discuss their Paganism in counseling. Study participant #1 put this sentiment in the following words.

*And certainly, in meeting our marriage counselor, from the get-go, we just put everything on the table. I mean, there were some other things that dealt with how we viewed marriage, and just different relationship dynamics, and some polyamory came into play. And so, we just put it all way out on the table, like, "Here we are. What do you think?" And she's like, "Okay, that's cool, whatever," and moved along, like that's just more data collection. "Also, I need your address and phone number, please." [laughing] And she was not fazed. And we're like, "This is absolutely perfect."

Participant #9 discussed how she used openness to polyamory as a proxy when searching for a therapist, leveraging that approach to romantic relationships as a strategy to identify open-minded counselors or therapists, and provided the following reflection.
I think I could guess that she was pretty liberal by the fact that-- I think it was her website said that she worked with couples and that included polyamorous environments. So I could kind of guess, based on that, or infer that it would probably be safe to talk about something else non-mainstream. There was one non-mainstream element, and transgendered people was mentioned on her website. She works with them. I was like, “Okay, this is somebody who is open-minded in general.”

Participant #8 contextualized polyamory in light of her Pagan views, and connected polyamory to different ways that myth and legend were implicated in her own individual romantic and sexual relationships.

There are a lot of Pagans that are also polyamorous, us included. And it's almost more embedded in the spiritual system. For example, we know worshiping the Norse Gods, there's a lot of examples in that, of the mythology of the Norse Gods being very promiscuous and having these different relationships that are not necessarily monogamous. So being able to explain that, coming from a different morality, I think, is more challenging for somebody who's outside of the community.

For research in counseling in particular, Pagans in college counseling centers are also a promising area for future research, especially for groups similar to those studied in the Harris et al. (2016) study. Many study participants in the current study indicated that their willingness to disclose or not disclose their Pagan identities or practices was related to their own stage in their identity formation process. Several study participants (n=3) reported that they received counseling while in college, but they were not sure how to present their spirituality to counselors because they did not themselves know where they were in the formation of their own spiritual identity. One participant was also concerned about confidentiality, and feared that parents would be notified of the participant Pagan interests, which the participant felt would be highly detrimental for their family relationship. Most
participants (n=3) who consulted a counselor on their college campus were not sure if they would have wanted to explore topics of spirituality with a counselor, or with an individual within the Pagan community more specifically. However, all participants (n=4) reported feeling uncertain or hesitant to describe their emerging Pagan interests to a college counselor based on their own feelings of self-awareness at that time.

Finally, in a slightly different vein, many study participants (n=8) indicated at some point in the interview that they felt that mental health professionals in general are not well-informed about Paganism and do not understand the worldview or practices. It could be a useful research project to create an assessment to measure the competence of counselors and their familiarity with Paganism. Many counselors may not be adequately educated on what beliefs and practices are common within a smaller and diverse spiritual category such as Paganism. Furthermore, the routine pathologization of terms like “magical thinking” and “bizarre beliefs” might be off-putting to Pagans when reading professional literature. Multicultural competence in working with Pagans requires counselors to be cognizant that while certain Pagan beliefs may appear somewhat unusual, those beliefs may actually be more common and viewed as normative within the Pagan environment or other related subcultural groups.

**Positionality and Reflexivity**

A substantial and detailed positionality statement is offered in Appendix A. However, for the purpose of this section of the study, the author’s own experiences with Pagan communities in a number of different regions in the southeastern United States provided an emic perspective that was likely instrumental in successfully recruiting participants and
maintaining rapport with these participants from recruitment, to the initial interview, to successful engagement in the follow-up interview process. Also, the author’s personal familiarity with the animistic worldview shared by most Pagans may have been an influence on the author’s personal contacts, who were willing to distribute the call for participants and encourage individuals in the Pagan communities in the region to contact the researcher to participate in the study. These individuals may have provided personal testimonials about the researcher when circulating the call for participants.

Finally, the author’s own motivation to engage in this study was related to hearing number of anecdotes at Pagan events and festivals in which Pagans reported feeling misunderstood by mental health professionals, or reported feeling reticent to seek out counseling or psychotherapy for reasons directly related to their Pagan identity. On the professional side, the author had also consulted with other psychotherapists in the community. The author was surprised to discover that many psychotherapists and counselors shared some anecdotal discomfort regarding the idea of working with a Pagan client, and differentiating Pagan beliefs from psychotic symptoms. This seemed to indicate a need for an additional resource for counselors and therapists to increase their competence when working with Pagan clients.

The author has participated in a number of different in-person Pagan groups and sub-communities over the years. This emic perspective was used to guide the development of the interview protocol, the method for recruiting participants, and the strategies used to build trust in the interview process.
Conclusion

Being able to efficiently, competently, and tactfully address issues of spirituality in counseling is one of the key skills for multiculturally-competent counseling (ASERVIC 2009). When the client is a member of a marginalized or nonmainstream spiritual path, the client may use a number of covering or passing strategies to manage the concealable stigmatized identity (CSI) of being Pagan. Competent counselors may consider the recommendations of the study participants in adapting their counseling approach to be more Pagan-friendly. Additionally, Pagans who are in counseling or psychotherapy may be more effectively able to self-advocate after reading this study. For more effective psychotherapy relationships, counselors must understand their clients, and clients must be capable of expressing their own needs, wants, and identities. The process requires a certain amount of engagement and buy-in from both parties, and Pagans are more common in the United States than may people realize.

The Religious Landscapes Survey, conducted in 2014 by the Pew Research Center, is one of the few such surveys including a category for Pagans and Wiccans. In the Pew poll data, self-reported Wiccans and Pagans together constituted 0.3% of the total U.S. population, which is approximately 956,000 people (2016). This indicates that nearly a million individuals in the United States self-identify as Pagan or Wiccan. To provide context to this data, the same Pew poll data indicated that .9% of individuals polled identified as Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2014). Therefore, for approximately every three Muslims in the United States in 2014, there was one person identifying as Pagan.

Participants in this study underscored the importance of their Pagan identity and practices for them, and all participants indicated they wanted this arena of their lives to be
respected by the counselors they consulted. Understanding the meaning of Paganism to its adherents is of critical importance to being able to serve these individuals well as clients in psychotherapy and counseling. While there is much variation among Pagans, for many of them, the identity and worldview of Paganism is highly salient to them. In the words of participant #7,

This [Paganism] is a way of life. This is how we identify with the world. It affects everything that we do. It affects how we look at the world. It's that important to us... And it should be treated that way. I mean, it's the fabric of who we are.
REFERENCES


*CMBMS Multicultural reader*, 331-348.

Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling [ASERVIC].

Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling.


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Positionality Statement

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Appendix C: Call for Participants
Appendix A:

Positionality Statement
Rationale for Positionality Statement

It is inevitable that one’s own personal biography and history, including a whole range of interrelated and overlapping personal identities, is implicated in the methodology and theory of qualitative research. As we are subjective individuals, this fact is inescapable. Since the researcher is themselves the primary research instrument in qualitative research, it behooves the ethical researcher to provide an inventory of this personal perspective, to be laid out and provided to readers. Doing this allowing the researcher to take the perspective of the researcher into account when reading the findings. A good qualitative researcher lays this perspective out for the reader in something called a “reflexivity statement” or a “positionality statement.” Such a narrative statement allows the researcher to take ownership of his or her biases, blind spots, and assumptions.

As described by Bourke (2014), cognizance of one’s positionality is a critical ingredient in high-quality qualitative research. This positionality statement includes information on the unique perspective on the researcher, including identities and even key personal experiences. Positionality statements such as these also address the unique context of the researcher’s own self in relationship to others, within the specific community of study and within other cultural communities that are also more indirectly related to the topic of the study. Seeing as perfect objectivity is impossible in all research, and more strikingly impossible in qualitative research, it is dishonest for the qualitative researcher to present him or herself as fully objective (Bourke, 2014). For the purpose of readability, this positionality statement will be written in first person.
Positionality: Academic and Professional Self

I started my academic journey in the public schools of Wake County, North Carolina. From there, I spent the first two years of my undergraduate degree at UNC-Asheville, a public liberal arts college that emphasized the humanities. My coursework at this university instilled a liberal arts mentality in me early-on, so that I was learning to look at wholes and themes, and to engage in critical thinking, rather than assuming my own objectivity or a position of cultural superiority. Based on my impressions of the values of that time and place, it seemed to me that the liberal arts were more highly regarded and respected, and that in years since this time, the integrative liberal arts perspective, and humanistic perspective that I later learned, have become less valued in society as a whole. However, I still hold these values of understanding the importance of context, culture, and history in any work we do: whether that work be qualitative research, clinical practice, or teaching. Learning to think critically about these assumptions was something I learned to do early on in my academic career.

In my master’s degree program, I was drawing on these same values again when I chose to attend a department that emphasized a humanistic approach to psychology, rather than a more mainstream approach emphasizing psychopathology. The program I selected had a heavy emphasis on phenomenology, critical psychology, humanistic psychology, and existential philosophy. The faculty at this department had an unusually diverse range of philosophical perspectives. As before, such an integrative and wide-ranging approach appealed to me, and seemed to allow for ways of knowing that were far beyond what was allowed within the more narrow range of clinical psychology programs. While some of the readings offered within this program were slightly dated, the openness to new perspectives
offered at West Georgia was highly valuable to me in my ability to have empathy for a wide range of clients, as well as to understand the lived experience of research participants that may be quite different from myself in their own worldviews, beliefs, and experiences.

In my doctoral program, I became a bit more pragmatic and had come to a realization that I could study such a perspective on my own terms, and that the philosophical sophistication of such a program ultimately little value in terms of my own earning potential. By this time, I became more career-focused and had started to build my career as a psychotherapist outside of my other work as a counselor educator. At this stage of my life, I selected a program based on what funding was available and what teaching opportunities were available to me. However, I retained my same values of philosophical diversity, and naturally gravitated toward qualitative research approaches, as well as the importance of spirituality in counseling. Integrating clinical practice with my new professional identity presented a few challenges, but by this point in my academic journey, I had enough autonomy to determine the meaning of my professional identity for myself, as well as a more complete understanding of the personal identities that I bring to my work in various research psychotherapy, and teaching environments.

**Positionality: Personal upbringing**

I am a white, female American who grew up in a small, rural town with few neighbors on the outskirts of Raleigh, North Carolina. While I was not raised with any particular religion, Christianity was an omnipresent entity in the culture. Most of my friends were more-or-less Christian, and the laws of the community I grew up in were heavily influenced by Christian values. My family also had several Jewish friends, and we often spent time with them. I remember feeling envious that many of them had rites of passage,
like Bar and Bat Mitzvas, which did not exist in my family. My immediate family did not attend church, and generally identified as agnostic. Both of my own parents had been raised Christian, but later became disengaged from church life, so while my family celebrated Christian holidays, there was little Christian meaning assigned to them.

Since I had very few, if any, religious beliefs imposed upon me growing up, and since I was raised with an encouragement of natural curiosity and coming to one’s own conclusions, I was not so affected by Christianity as some others growing up with a family religion might have been. Also, seeing as this was the early days of the internet, I was able to find information on Pagan spirituality widely available through personal websites and message boards. While this information was admittedly of limited quality in some instances, it allowed me a means to participate in a sort of spiritual community that I otherwise would not have had any access to through people in my own suburban town. Growing up with an engineer and tech-nerd father, our family had very early access to the internet. My own ability to access the internet was instrumental, because this was a way that I could be exposed to alternate sexualities and lifestyle choices, like polyamory and LGBTQ, that I otherwise would not have otherwise known about. Few people of my age would have been exposed to these topics as early on in a small community such as the one in which I lived.

While my developing spirituality was regarded with some ambivalence by my family, I never felt that I was forced to believe in any particular way, and I also felt that my autonomy in my own spirituality was respected, even if it was not well-understood by my family. It did cause some difficulty for my Christian friends, I think, whose families I sensed had taught them that what I believed and practiced was wrong. When I felt old friends gravitating away from me as a teenager, I remember never feeling quite sure if it was due to
my interest in Paganism, or if they were biased against me due to the values of their variety of Christianity.

However, while I never strongly personally identified with the term “Pagan,” over the ensuing decades, I would come to affiliate with and participate in a number of related groups that were highly meaningful communities for me at varying stages of my life. Some of these were more intensive involvements for me than others. Some have been more private, some have been more public. However, a full overview of all the different groups and traditions I have been involved with would far exceed the space of this positionality statement, and I think would make little difference in my own perspective as a researcher.

I have also been a client in varying forms of psychotherapy over the years, including Jungian analysis, internal family systems, Gestalt, and humanistic. My own spirituality had differing levels of relevance at different times, and I presented my spiritually differently as I anticipated the counselor or therapist would be most able to understand it.

Across my life, however, my spirituality and my coming and going from different groups, some of which were Pagan, has become an important way of identifying landmarks for myself as I grow and change and evolve as a human being. This way of using of different spiritual communities to mark one’s own journey is common among Pagans and those of similar spiritual worldviews. The flexibility and adaptability of the beliefs and practices is well-suited to coming and going from different groups, as well as giving one autonomy to determine one’s own level of involvement and engagement commensurate with one’s own values and other life commitments at varying times. These sentiments were echoed by a number of participants, who talked about differences in their Pagan identities and practices
across the lifespan. Identity development for Pagans in particular seems to be a compelling area for further research on spirituality in the United States.

Finally, as I am writing this statement, I am also aware of the potential stigma of having such involvements, and how fraught such disclosures might be as a person who also works professionally as a clinician. Many Pagans, especially those who are licensed professionals of varying types, are closeted (Berger et al., 2014). To some extent, these individuals feel that their livelihood depends on this professional image, and I feel similarly. Therefore, while standards of professionalism have been changing rapidly, I am aware that what is included in such a statement retains a certain permanence. Unfortunately, our cultural biases and judgments may not retain the same level of permanence, and that the permissiveness we have seen in the United States culture in recent years may not have a lasting quality.

Relation of Self to Study Participants and Cultural Context

As noted in the literature review, Pagans are mostly white, often female, and tend to be highly-educated. Interestingly, according to Berger et al. (2003), Pagans also tend to have significantly lower earnings than one would expect based on their educational qualifications. Other researchers such as Tejeda (2015) have examined how Pagans in the United States face workplace discrimination, and the comments of participants in the current study have also indicated a fear of discrimination both from family and from work. In the current study, participants shared covering and passing strategies that were used even with their own personal counselors and therapists.

Pagans often do not grow up in Pagan families, and for Pagans who are, the values of determining one’s own path is often integral. Intergenerational transmission of the Pagan
belief systems is not so common as in other religions traditions. Pagan communities often are much smaller and differ widely from one another as to the deities worshipped, the practices engaged in, and even the values of the small community. Furthermore, Pagan groups often split or merge, and Pagans may be involved in a number of different covens or groups simultaneously, so that the level of intimacy and community within these groups may range widely. Historically, many Pagans find their roots in traditional spiritual practices involving nature, seasonality, myths, ritual, and practices cultural identity. The specifics of these can vary greatly by group, and are often highly idiosyncratic and creative. The same has consistently true of my personal practices.

All of this has already been covered in more detail in the literature review. However, contextually, Pagans often have difficulty describing their identities to others. Stigma against pagans has been particularly widespread since the “Satanic Panic” phenomena of the 1980s and 1990s (Berger et al., 2003; Victor, 1993).

**Positionality Summary**

Rigorous qualitative research requires that a positionality statement is included in order to allow the reader to be aware of the unique perspectives, biases, and formative experiences of the researcher. For this reason, a positionality statement or narrative statement provides an overview of the researcher’s own personal and professional backgrounds and interests.

My own academic training early in on in a liberal arts college, and later master’s degree in a Humanistic Psychology program, had a strong influence on my own academic approach and way of coming to research in general. On a personal level, my own involvement with Pagan culture in varying forms over the years has provided me with a
certain emic perspective on the culture. Additionally, I have had a number of friends and colleagues over the years share their own concerns about how to find “Pagan-friendly” therapists. Therefore, I see myself as a potential an advocate for Pagans in search of counseling or therapy on the one hand, and an ambassador to other mental health professionals on the other. Research projects such as this can help those professionals increase their competence when working with the very internally-diverse Pagan population, and those with similar animistic worldviews.
Appendix B:

Interview Protocol
The Psychotherapy Experience of Pagans: a Narrative Phenomenological Inquiry

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

I: Preliminary Screening Protocol:

- Greet participant on phone.
- Confirm participant meets inclusion criteria for study.
- Identify and screen out any individuals with severe and persistent mental illness and provide referrals if needed.
- Walk participant through Qualtrics survey for informed consent, allowing participant to ask any questions and submit informed consent electronically.

“If now is a good time for you, we can proceed to the interview. It will take from 30-60 minutes. Do you have any other questions before we begin recording and move on to the interview?”

II: Collect Demographic Information:

“What is your age?”
“What is your gender?”
“What is your race?”
“What is your occupation?”

III: Main Interview Protocol:

RQ1: *(How do Pagans experience themselves in counseling or psychotherapy?)*

“Tell me about your experience in counseling or psychotherapy.”
“Tell me about how being Pagan affected your experience.”
“Tell me what you might change about this experience, if anything.”

RQ2: *(How do Pagans navigate their identity and beliefs in a counseling or psychotherapy environment?)*
“Tell me how you presented your Pagan identity within the counseling / psychotherapy.”
“Please speak about how you presented your Pagan beliefs in the counseling or psychotherapy.”
“Please tell me about any factors that made you more or less comfortable being Pagan in that environment.”

**RQ3:** *How do Pagans feel that counseling or psychotherapy could improve in serving their unique needs?*

“Please tell me what you feel counselors and psychotherapists need to know about Pagans.”
“Please speak about how counseling or psychotherapy could be better for Pagans or similar individuals.”
“What other information do you want to share on this and related topics?”

**IV: Follow-up Interview Protocol:**

“You said that…. Could you please elaborate more on this?”
“It sounded in the initial interview that you were saying…. Could you please confirm if that’s accurate?”
“Is there anything additional you’d like to add at this time?”
Appendix C:

Call for Participants
CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS:
The Psychotherapy Experience of Pagans: a Narrative Phenomenological Inquiry.

TITLE OF THE STUDY
If you identify as Pagan and have been in counseling or psychotherapy at some point in your life, we would like to invite you participate in this research study. Before you contact us, we would like to provide information on why this research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. You may contact us to ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information.

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT
I am a Doctoral candidate in the department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development at North Carolina State University. I am also a Licensed Professional Counselor Associate in the state of North Carolina. This study will be completed as my dissertation project.

While I do not personally identify as Pagan at this time, I have participated in a number of different Pagan communities and have an intimate familiarity with Pagan belief systems, practices, and worldviews. I have also presented on mental health awareness at the Triangle Pagan Pride. I have also advocated for greater understanding of Pagans by presenting at state-level counseling conferences.

The study is intended to answer three primary questions:
• How do Pagans experience themselves in counseling or psychotherapy?
• How do Pagans navigate their identity and beliefs in a counseling or psychotherapy environment?
• How do Pagans feel that counseling or psychotherapy could improve in serving their unique needs?

The results of these interviews will be used to develop recommendations to assist counselors and other psychotherapists in better understanding the needs of Pagan individuals.

WHAT WILL PARTICPATION INVOLVE?
Participation begins with an email to us to indicate your interest. We will contact you to arrange a screening call, during which time we will go over informed consent, verify that you meet criteria for the study, and answer any further questions you may have.

You may choose if the screening and interview will be conducted using your regular phone, or using a free telemedicine program, VSee, which provides an added level of encryption. No identifying information will be collected.

Finally, we may contact you for a follow-up interview of up to 30 minutes.
Participation is completely voluntary and you have a right to refuse participation, refuse any question you may be asked, and withdraw at any time without any consequence whatsoever.

WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?
Leaders in the Pagan community have been asked to distribute this document to recruit participants for the current study.

For this study, we are seeking participants who:
- Have identified as Pagan for at least the past 5 years
- Has been in some form of counseling or psychotherapy during a time when they identified as Pagan
- Are between the ages of 21 and 65
- Willing to be interviewed for 30-60 minutes, with a potential follow-up interview of up to 30 minutes.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?
Benefits include a confidential opportunity to speak about ways that Pagan identity has influenced your experiences with counseling or psychotherapy. Also, participation benefits the Pagan community, particularly Pagans in the future who are in search of an understanding counselor or psychotherapist.

Risks for this type of study are generally minimal. Risks include discussing potentially difficult experiences and the limited possibility of data breeches. Recorded interviews will be stored separately from any identifying information, including name, email, or phone.

You should know that this interview is not counseling or psychotherapy. We will attempt to provide an appropriate referral if you are seeking such services.

WILL PARTICIPATION BE CONFIDENTIAL?
Absolutely. Only the interviewer will have access to your identity. We will remove any identifying information before publishing the results of the study. Portions of transcripts from these interviews may be included in the final dissertation project or in a future article or publication.

HOW WILL INFORMATION BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?
All interviews will be recorded and stored on an encrypted hard drive. Transcription will be conducted by a third-party with experience in confidential interview research transcription. This entity will have no access to your identifying information, which will be stored separately.

All recordings will be destroyed six months after the end of the project.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?
The results will be used to prepare my dissertation study. The results may also be used to prepare an article in a peer-reviewed journal or article at a later time.

HOW DO I LEARN MORE?
If you meet the criteria identified above and you would like to participate in this study, we would be delighted to hear from you! Please email legardn4@ncsu.edu with the subject line, “Pagan Study.” We will contact you to arrange a screening phone call, explain more about the consent process for the study, and to arrange an interview if appropriate.

THANK YOU
We hope to hear from you soon.

Warm regards,
Lauren Gardner, MA, LPC
Doctoral candidate
Legardn4@ncsu.edu
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