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Contemporary Paganism is an umbrella term that covers a diverse set of religious and spiritual orientations that exclude mainstream Abrahamic faiths and major Eastern Religions. Paganism is often negatively stereotyped and misunderstood by mainstream society. Pagan practitioners often face stigmatization and discrimination. Due to this, Pagans often hide their stigmatized identity from others which is known as being in the Broom Closet. Currently there is limited academic research that addresses how Pagans manage their stigmatized identities and navigate the Broom Closet. This study uses a targeted life history approach grounded in phenomenology to capture how Pagans perceive the Broom Closet and what factors determine how they disclose their highly suspect identities to outsiders of their religion. Interviews were conducted with six participants who self-identified as Pagan. Findings support existing literature concerning Pagans and provides additional detailed accounts of Pagan experience in and out of the Broom Closet

IN AND OUT OF THE BROOM CLOSET: AN INQUIRY INTO PAGAN IDENTITY

MANAGEMENT

by

Holly Brown

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Approved by

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Dr. Steve Kroll-Smith
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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my thesis chair, Dr. Kroll-Smith and committee members Dr. Brown-Jeffy and Dr. Daynes for their unending support and patience, to Melissa and Norman for pushing me towards the finish line, and to Xenn, George, Saoirse, JE, Jasmine, and Belle.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

To be a Pagan in a Judeo-Christian society is to hold – in some important ways- different fundamental beliefs and practices than the typical norms of this society. My thesis will document and offer an interpretation of how Pagans make their way in a decidedly Judeo-Christian culture, one that is skeptical, if not highly suspicious of what they understand to be the practices of Paganism. I seek to understand how Pagans navigate this social terrain and how they perceive and experience others who do not subscribe to their historically unique creed and rituals. Specifically, this thesis explores how Pagans understand and conceptualize their identity and sense of self in relation to deciding to disclose or hide their Pagan religious affiliation to non-Pagans.

Paganism is an umbrella term that houses a myriad of diverse religious practices and spiritualities outside of Abrahamic and most Eastern religions (Adler 1986). Paganism is a religion that celebrates fluidity and diversity and often encourages its practitioners to create their own conceptions of divinity. Although there are numerous religions housed under the Pagan umbrella, many beliefs focus on nature worship, polytheism, and animism (Adler, 1986; Brown 2013).

Gerald Gardner is considered the founder of the first organized religion of contemporary Witchcraft (Guiley 1999). The publication of Gerald Gardner's book Witchcraft Today (1954) introduced what is now referred to as Gardnerian Wicca (Adler; 1986; Brown 2013). In Witchcraft Today (1954) Gardner aims to establish Wicca as a valid religion by outlining its history and offering a description of its beliefs and practices (Hutton 2019). Witchcraft Today (1954) led to the popularization of Wicca and Witchcraft in the United States during the 1960s (Adler 1986; Brown 2013). As Wicca began to grow in popularity in the United States, so did other contemporary Pagan religions. Pagan religions continued to grow in popularity alongside the liberal and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Adler 1986; Wilson 2005). Today,

Wicca is still one of the largest Pagan religious groups found within the United States. Due to its popularity and visibility, non-Pagans often form what little understanding they may have of Paganism from Wicca (Harrington 2016).

Despite its growing popularity, Pagan religions are still often misunderstood by mainstream society (Adler 1986; Reece 2016; Tejeda 2015). Paganism and Witchcraft have long been mistakenly associated with Satanism and devil worship (Adler 1986; Brown 2013; Cookson 1997). During the 1980s there was a concerted effort by Christian Right political action groups to eradicate and delegitimize Pagan religions in the United States. They deployed a campaign of misinformation linking Pagan religions with satanic ritual and child abuse (Cookson 1997). Wiccans sought to counteract the misinformation of theirs and other Pagan religions by attempting to educate the public. They provided information clearly distinguishing Wicca as a separate and unrelated religion to Satanism and focused on building positive community relationships and educating governmental agencies such as police departments, prisons, courts, and the military (Cookson 1997).

Practitioners of Paganism in the United States often feel that their religion is misunderstood or misrepresented by non-members due to the history of intolerance and misrepresentation surrounding Paganism (Brown 2013; Hoadley 2016; Tejeda 2015). When non-Pagans hear "Witch" or "Witchcraft," they often associate these terms with evil doers or devil worship. Because of these associations, Paganism is often viewed as an immoral or evil religion (Hoadley 2016; Reece 2016; Tejeda 2015). Popular culture has begun showing Witches and Witchcraft in a positive light, through media such as Harry Potter and Charmed. While witches are shown in a more positive light, they are still displayed as possessing fantastic magical powers. When non-Pagans hear these terms, even if they don't ascribe an immoral label to Witchcraft, they are often left thinking that practitioners of Paganism are delusional or crazy because they don't have any understanding of Witchcraft and magic as it relates to Paganism (Reece 2016; Tejeda 2015).

The stigma associated with Pagan religions leaves practitioners vulnerable to discrimination within institutional settings and within their interpersonal relationships (Bradford 2011; Cookson 1997, Reece 2016, Tejeda 2015, Moe et al 2013; Yardley 2008). Pagans are acutely aware of the stigma associated with their religion and the possibility they will experience discrimination due to their affiliation. Because of this, Pagans may choose to hide their religious identities from non-Pagans. Hiding one's identity is so prevalent in the Pagan community that it is commonly referred to as "being in the Broom Closet," similar to how an LGBTQ person refers to "being in the closet (Reece 2016)." Limited research currently exists that addresses how Pagans navigate the Broom Closet to manage their stigmatized identities (Tejeda 2015). This thesis seeks to better understand Pagan experiences of being in and out of the Broom Closet.

Research Questions

Three guiding research questions informed this study. They are:

1. What factors influence a person's decision to either disclose or hide his or her Pagan identity from others?

2. What are the resulting outcomes of either decision and how do those outcomes impact their lives and overall emotional well-being?

3. What do Pagans experience when they step out of the Broom Closet?

Answering these questions in a conclusive way was not possible given the constraints of the COVID pandemic and my relatively small sample size. But I am able to shine a light—limited at times—on each of the queries. In addition, I was curious to see what other, perhaps unexpected, themes would emerge from speaking to participants. To address this topic, I compared the experiences of those who are still in the Broom Closet and those who are currently out

Due to the arguably unique topic of this thesis, I have organized the literature review into five parts including a modest history of Pagans and Paganism followed by a brief overview of

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contemporary beliefs and practices, Pagan beliefs and practices, and Wicca. Part 5 segues into literature documenting stigma, and the discrimination and stigma often experienced by Pagans and their children. What follows is a discussion of my conceptual orientation and methods, including my sampling frame, and findings. I conclude my thesis with a discussion of the findings obtained during this study.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

A Short Primer on Pagans and Paganism

Contemporary Paganism is an umbrella term that covers a diverse set of religious and spiritual orientations that exclude mainstream Abrahamic faiths and major Eastern Religions (Adler 1986). Pagan religions are often viewed by its practitioners as a reconstruction or revival of religious beliefs and practices from all over the world that pre-date Christianity, such as the ancient Greek, Roman, or Egyptian religions and mythologies. Similarities commonly identified in Paganism are polytheism, pantheism, veneration of nature, and animism (Adler 1986). Many Pagan religions found in the United States, such as Wicca, specifically link their history to indigenous folk and religious practices found in western and central Europe (Hutton 2011; Tejeda 2015).

Historically, the word Pagan did not exist prior to Christianity and was originally used as a means to describe those who did not follow the Christian faith (Brown 2013; Phillips 1995). Pagan originates from the Latin word *pagus* which means a rural district outside of town and *paganus* meaning someone who dwells within that area (Adler 1986). Christians and Hebrews of that time advocated for the suppression and conversion of the "old religions" and Goddess worship (Brown 2013; Wilson 2005). Since people from these rural areas were typically the last to convert to Christianity, the term Pagan became a derogatory term to describe those who practiced the old religions of their communities. Today, the word Pagan has been reclaimed by contemporary practitioners (Adler 1986; Hoadley 2016).

Many scholars and practitioners have participated in debate concerning the historical origins of Paganism. These debates primarily focus on whether modern Paganism is a revived practice of pre-Christian religions or whether Paganism was created in the 20th century (Wilson 2005). Historians during the 19th and 20th century believed that medieval British society continued to practice the old religions in secret despite Christianity being the dominant religion.

Aspects of Paganism were assimilated into Christian practices and believed to have survived through a witch religion that existed in secrecy throughout western and central Europe. This witch religion was believed to be a direct continuation of an ancient and universal Pagan religion that worshiped nature deities. Christianity viewed this religion as a threat and sought to eradicate it during the witch trials of the 16th and 17th centuries. It was believed that many of those who were tried and killed as witches were practitioners of the old witch religion (Hutton 2011).

During the latter half of the 20th century, however, historians no longer supported these claims. Continued analysis of relevant medieval records offered no supporting evidence of a Pagan religion surviving throughout Europe's formal conversion to Christianity or those accused during the witch trials belonged to a surviving witch religion. Although a conscious Pagan religion had not survived underground in secret until modern day, aspects of Paganism did survive through their assimilation into Christianity and through various folk customs and traditions (Hutton 2011). It is these survivals, along with other existing mythologies from ancient times, that inform what modern Paganism is today. Modern Paganism takes inspiration from images and ideas existing from ancient times and evolved them to suit modern needs (Hutton 2011). Many practitioners now recognize that much of their religious history is based on myth, and not historically accurate (Adler 1986; Hutton 2011).

Wicca, one of the largest and most notable of Pagan religions, makes the unsupported claim that it is the ancient Witch religion that did not resurface again until the 1950s (Hutton 2011). Gerald Gardner has been accredited as the founder of contemporary Witchcraft, or Wicca. This was due to his publication of Witchcraft Today (1954) after the repeal of the English Witchcraft Laws in 1951 (Grieve 1995; Tejeda 2015). In Witchcraft Today (1954) Gardner offers an unverified account of a surviving witch religion, claiming to have received his information from a surviving coven (Tejeda 2015).

Gardner largely drew from the works of Margaret Murray, another supporter of the witch cult hypothesis, to support the claims made within his own book, Witchcraft Today (1954). Both Gardner and Murray have been criticized by academics for fabricating much of the information in their works which are still in circulation today (Adler 1986). Regardless of the criticism that Gardner has since received, Witchcraft Today (1954) led to the popularization of Wicca first in England and then in the United States during the 1960s cultivating the growth of other forms of Paganism (Adler 1986; Phillips 1995; Tejeda 2015; Wilson 2005).

Paganism achieved further popularity in the United States due to its recognition by the liberal movements of the 1960s (Wilson 2005). Specifically, Paganism and Goddess worship attracted many feminists as an alternative to a male centered Christianity (Grieve 1995). Feminists embraced the religion for its recognition of female divinity through Goddess worship and adopted the witch as a symbol of female independence and power (Hutton 2011). Many others simply viewed Pagan religions as a better religious or spiritual alternative to mainstream religions due to its acceptance of different gender and sexual orientations, focus on environmentalism, and lack of dogmatic practices (Adler 1986; Wilson 2005)

Paganism has often been conflated with Satanism and devil worship (Adler 1986; Brown 2013; Cookson 1997). Misrepresentations of Pagan faiths as Satanic and evil have led to an intolerance of Paganism from mainstream society. Christian and political groups have sought to suppress the growth of Pagan religions and advocate religious intolerance towards Pagans believing them to be a threat against a Christian America. During the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and 90s much misinformation was presented to the public linking Paganism, and Wicca specifically, with Satanism and Satanic ritual abuse. Cookson (1997) offered accounts received from Pagan practitioners and families experiencing negative custodial actions, harassment, and intolerance from governmental institutions such as law enforcement, and personal attacks due to their religious affiliation.

During this time, Wiccans fought against the proliferation of misinformation. While there was some success in educating the public, various entities such as the Christian Right attempted to block Wiccan attempts at clarifying information around their religion and distancing it from Satanic ritual abuse (Cookson 1997). Efforts towards public education eventually led to a mild mainstream acceptance of Wicca in American society and popular culture, somewhat improved relationships with governmental institutions, and inclusion in the military chaplaincy handbook during the 2000s (Cookson 1997; Tejeda 2015).

Contemporary Paganism

Today, estimates of the Pagan population within the United States are uncertain. This has been attributed to difficulty in gaining access to the population. Many Pagans fear being identified as Pagan, and often select a different response option when being surveyed to remain hidden. The U.S. Census Bureau has estimated that there are 682,000 Pagans within the United States, but other scholars argue that the number is much higher estimating that there are nearly 13 million Pagans residing in the U.S (Brown 2013; Tejeda 2015). Difficulties in gathering demographic information has also been attributed to Paganism being included under New Age categories along with other religious or spiritual groups that are distinctly different (Jensen & Thompson 2008).

The 1990-2000 American Religious Identification Survey found Paganism to be one of the fastest growing religions in American society (Jensen & Thompson 2008). Paganism's expansion in the US has been linked to Pagans, who are often geographically dispersed, connecting and sharing information through the internet (Cowan 2005; Tejeda 2015). The anonymity of the internet has also provided safe spaces for Pagans to connect with one another who may otherwise hide their religious identity (Cowan 2005; Starhawk 1999).

Berger et al. (2003) has been cited as conducting one of the most comprehensive surveys of Pagan demographic information (Tejeda 2015). Berger et al. (2003) conducted a

national Pagan Census survey to provide demographic data on the Pagan community and insights into Pagan beliefs, practices, and daily lives. The Pagan community took it upon themselves to distribute this survey with instructions to mail completed surveys back to the researchers. Her findings indicated that many Pagans had higher levels of education, were more politically active, and had average levels of income. Additionally, most Pagans were found to be younger, female, married, and White (Berger 2003). A more recent study conducted by Pew Research Center in their 2008 US Religious Landscape Survey counted Pagan respondents under the category of "New Age" allowing respondents to self-identify their religious affiliation as Wicca, Pagan, or Other New Age Group (Pew Research Center 2008:110; Tejeda 2015:91). Findings indicated that Pagans were more evenly distributed in gender with 51% being female. Of those surveyed, 38% were married, 70% had no children, 66% were under the age of 50, 53% had a high school education or some college, 84% were white, and 62% had under a household income of $50,000 (Tejeda 2015:91).

Jensen & Thompson (2008) conducted a study using internet data to estimate the distribution of Paganism across the United States. Their findings suggest that Pagans are more likely to be located in states that have a predominant green or pro-environmental culture, states with higher religious affiliations, and states that have greater ancestral ties to England. Pagans were less likely to be found residing in states with a predominant gun culture or states where women experienced more political empowerment (Jensen & Thompson 2008).

Pagan Beliefs and Practices

There has never existed one structured body of Paganism in the past or in the present (Phillips 1995). Due to the diversity of religious paths that exist under Paganism, it is impossible to provide a complete overview of all beliefs and practices. Some of the more common religions included under the Pagan umbrella are Norse, Celtic, Alexandrian, Anglo-Saxon, Dianic, Druidic, Faery, Strega, and Wiccan traditions. There has been some suggestion that many

Pagans today choose their religious or spiritual pathway based on where they can trace their ancestry to (Hoadley 2016).

Pagans have built a reputation for celebrating fluidity and diversity within their religion, usually encouraging its practitioners to create their own spiritual paths and conceptions of the divine (Adler 1986; Brown 2013). Sometimes they may even take pieces of several religious paths to create their own. Although debates do occasionally exist centering around various religious aspects of Paganism, dogmatic practices are rarely advocated for and primarily rejected. Many scholars, however, have identified primary themes that they argue are associated with the majority of Pagan religions. Some of these themes include polytheism, animism, and magic (Adler 1986; Hoadley 2016).

Polytheism simply means to believe in or worship more than one deity. This is typically seen through the personification of both a masculine and feminine deity, or the God and Goddess. Several deities have also been revived from various mythologies including those coming from ancient Greece and Rome. Animism is the belief that divinity encompasses all things and exists throughout nature in things such as trees, rocks, and wildlife. Many Pagans believe that the existence of deities can be found throughout nature and that because of this all things are connected through the divine. This idea of nature worship has led the Pagan community to be concerned with the protection of the environment. Pagans typically advocate for environmental protections and practices by the general public as well as organizations and government (Adler 1986; Hoadley 2016; Starhawk 1999).

Some Pagan religions incorporate magical craft or ritual into their religious practices. Although magic tends to be sensationalized and depicted in popular culture as something supernatural, those who practice modern Witchcraft do not view it as stemming from the supernatural. Instead, magic is described as the attempt to cause change to occur through an expression of willpower or focusing one's intention to produce some desired outcome or manifestation (Adler 1986). Magic can be used as a religious tool bringing the practitioner closer

to deity (Wilson 2005) or "As a craft, it attempts to achieve practical ends by psychic means, for good, useful and healing purposes" (Farrar & Farrar 1981:12). While magical practice is often accepted, most paths have rules concerning the use of magic that typically forewarn practitioners not to participate in any magical expression that could intentionally or unintentionally cause harm to others or be viewed as a selfish request of the universe. There do remain some exceptions to these rules, however (Adler 1986; Cunningham 1989; Hoadley 2016).

Wicca in Context

Wicca has played a key historical role in shaping the contours of Paganism. Due to the popularity of Wicca in the United States many people use it as their way of understanding Paganism despite the numerous other Pagan religions that exist. This is typically reflected in academic studies as well to the point of receiving criticism from others who point out that Wicca is not the only practiced Pagan religion (Harrington 2016). Wiccans believe in a "supreme divine power, unknowable, ultimate, from which the entire universe sprang" (Cunningham, 1989, p. 9). This supreme power is typically personified into the masculine and feminine forms of the God and Goddess (Cunningham 1989).

The God and Goddess can represent several pantheons of deities across the world and Wiccans often associate their concept of the God and Goddess with well-known deities from ancient religions (Wilson 2005). The Goddess is usually represented by the maiden, mother, and crone in association with the lunar cycles, and rules over all feminine aspects of nature. The God is associated with the sun, being the source of all life, and rules over all masculine aspects of nature. He is often referred to as The Horned God due to his association with powerful animals such as deer and elk. Many Pagans believe that Christians have historically conceptualized the Satanic Devil around imagery of the Horned God in order to demonize the

practices of Pagans. The Goddess and God are believed to be the universal force that permeates all of creations and connects all living things and nature (Cunningham 1989).

The main belief that is found across various Wiccan traditions is described as the Wiccan Rede. The Wiccan Rede states, "An it harm none, do what ye will" (Cunningham 1989). This belief is usually interpreted as not participating in any action that can bring harm to oneself, other people, or to the environment and animals (Adler 1986; Cunningham 1989; Wilson 2005). Wiccans have been described as being unconcerned with placing guilt on those who participate in harmful actions towards others and instead encourage taking responsibility for their actions (Wilson 2005). Similar to the Wiccan Rede, many Wiccans additionally subscribe to "The Rule of Three" or the "Three-Fold Law" which believes that whatever intention or energy someone puts out into the universe will be returned to that person three times (Adler 1986; Cunningham 1989). This belief is similar to the concept of Karma (Wilson 2005).

Discrimination and Stigma: What the Literature Says

In his 1963 work, Stigma Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity, Erving Goffman discusses three categories of stigmatization. These categories include abominations of the body, blemishes of individual character, and tribal stigma. Individuals who possess one of these forms of stigma are either discredited or discreditable amongst so called "normal people" (Goffman 1963:3). The discredited are ones who have already been labeled as stigmatized by society. This can be because their stigma is clearly visible, such as skin color or readily perceived physical disability, or because a more hidden stigma has become known about. The discreditable are those that hold hidden, or less perceptible, stigma. Although their stigma is not readily apparent, there is always the possibility of being discovered, and therefore discredited by others. To avoid being discredited, people with hidden stigmatized identities often employ various "passing" strategies to conceal their stigma (Goffman 1963:41-42).

Goffman differentiates between actual social identity and virtual social identity. A virtual social identity is one that others perceive or assume a stranger to have, while an actual social identity is the attributes the individual can be proven to have (Goffman 1963:2). Goffman argues that stigmatized individuals are usually aware of how others perceive their stigma, and sometimes internalize these views, which can lead to feelings of shame. Being aware of their stigma, and how others would perceive them, they are left feeling as if they are never truly accepted, or met as equals, by others during social interactions (Goffman 1963:7). When in public spaces, Goffman observes the stigmatized individual may cower from others or meet them with a "hostile bravado" which can cause its own negative consequences (Goffman 1963:17).

Goffman discusses the differences between social settings such as public settings amongst strangers and more intimate settings such as institutional or intimate relationships. While personal information is not required to be shared in public during interactions such as with store clerks or strangers, a certain amount of more private information is required to be shared with colleagues at work or amongst family and more intimate relationships (Goffman 1963:51-56). The discreditable must decide how much information they are going to share during these more intimate encounters (Goffman 1963:42). If they do not disclose information about themselves, then they may also feel shame for lying about who they are (Goffman 1963:73-74). Bruce Link's (1987) "Modified Labeling Theory" adds additional insight on the consequences produced by possessing a stigmatized identity. Drawing from his own studies of the stigmatizing effects of mental illness, Link argues that it is far more important to understand how stigmatizing labels can have a detrimental effect on an individual's lived experiences and life outcomes. Negative consequences take place through an individual's self-devaluation due to the expectation of being viewed poorly by others (Link 1987:109-111). Other negative consequences can include demoralization, income loss, unemployment, (Link 1987:105-108)

limited social networks, negative conceptions of self (Link et.al 1987: 419-420) isolation, and overall poorer quality of life (Dollar & Ray 2014:723).

Modified labeling theory discusses how, through socialization, stigmatized individuals become aware of ways they are likely to be labeled and treated by society including rejection by society. Link and his colleagues' have argued that fearing or expecting the rejection of others has led those with stigmatized labels to create defensive strategies to avoid negative interactions with others (Link et al 1989:402-403). These responses include secrecy, withdrawal, and education. Secrecy occurs when the labeled individual conceals their stigmatized identity from others to avoid rejection. Withdrawal occurs when the individual limits their social interactions with others and avoids those who they believe may not be accepting of their identity. Instead, individuals tend to seek out others who may share the same label as themselves or who they perceive to be accepting of their stigmatized identity. Education is described as a form of preventative telling. This is where the individual will try to educate others about their stigmatized identity in a way that dispels stereotypes and negates negative interactions (Link et al 1989:403).

Although these three forms of coping with possessing a stigmatized label can help the individual avoid negative reactions from others, they carry with them their own negative consequences. Secrecy and withdrawal can lead to the isolation of those who employ these strategies in a way that limits social resources such as connections with others that allow for improved life outcomes. Although education can negate stigma surrounding certain labels, those who employ this strategy are still making themselves vulnerable to potential negative reactions from others by disclosing their stigma (Link et. al 1989:403). Secrecy and withdrawal have been described as promoting exclusionary behavior due to avoidance of others while education has been described as promoting inclusionary behavior because it increases the chance of developing supportive social networks (Dollar & Ray 2014:724). While Link and colleagues developed their modified labeling theory based on studies looking at those with

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mental illness, researchers have found it applicable to other stigmatized groups of people (Dollar & Ray 2014:723).

Religious discrimination and victimization are topics of concern for many Pagans as they feel that their religion is oftentimes misrepresented or misunderstood by non-Pagans. Pagans oftentimes go out of their way to hide their identities to avoid potential negative reactions from outsiders to their religion due to the stereotypes that surround it. Hiding their religious identity is so prevalent among Pagans that the Pagan community has often referred to it as "being in the Broom Closet" similar to how LGBT individuals describe themselves as "being in the closet." Specifically, research has indicated that Pagans fear false accusations from others, experiencing prejudice from family, friends, and romantic partners, and discrimination from various institutional settings (Adler 1986; Reece 2016; Tejeda 2015).

In addition to hiding their identity from others, Pagans have also been found to withdraw from the dominant society and seek out social connections with other Pagans and those that they believe may be more accepting of their religion. While this has the ability to shield Pagans from the discriminatory actions of others, some researchers have posited that this response can limit beneficial social connections and have negative consequences on life opportunities such as employment (Brown 2013; Hoadley 2016; Wilson 2004; Sprouse 2014; Tejeda 2015).It has also been argued that this secretive tendency perpetuates the existence of stereotypes and misunderstandings towards Paganism because it does nothing to educate mainstream society about the reality of the religion and its practitioners (Hoadley 2016:90-91).

Oftentimes, Paganism is mistakenly equated to devil worshipping and condemned by others as being an immoral or evil religion (Mcclure 2017; Reece 2016; Tejeda 2015). Hoadley (2016) conducted a study that explored non-Pagan perceptions towards Pagan religions. She found that many of her respondents, along with indicating that they perceived Paganism to be associated with concepts of evil, expressed that much of their knowledge came from various forms of media. Many cited fictional television shows or movies, such as Harry Potter and

Charmed, as informing their ideas of Paganism. Those who based their notions of Paganism from various forms of media had sensationalized notions of Paganism that included Pagans having unrealistic magical powers, participating in ritual sacrifice, and being in league with the Christian concept of the Devil or Satan (Hoadley 2016: 50-56).

Evidence has also suggested that even when non-Pagans do not perceive Paganism as being associated with evil, they still view Pagans as being delusional or mentally ill. This is primarily due to Pagan acceptance of magical craft and limited outsider knowledge of these practices (Reece 2016:70). Due to this association, some researchers have also advocated for the necessity of social workers to recognize the unique challenges faced by their Pagan clients (Moe et al 2013; Yardley 2008). Specifically, attention has been directed towards the need for counselors to avoid conflating Pagan religious affiliation with Satanic worship and practices or conflating affiliation with the religion as a sign of being mentally ill (Moe et al 2013:52). The necessity to also take into consideration the stress resulting from belonging to a marginalized and stigmatized religious identity when diagnosing mental disorders has also been addressed by researchers (Brown 2013; Moe et al 2013; Yardley 2008).

Another area of great concern for Pagans is the issue of workplace discrimination. Tejeda (2015) conducted two studies to examine the existence and consequences of workplace discrimination toward Pagan individuals. His research has indicated that Pagans sometime find it necessary to hide their religious identity within the workplace due to the fear of losing their jobs, being passed over for promotions, and experiencing prejudice from coworkers as a result of how their religion is portrayed within society. It was also found that Pagan workers earn less income and have less job satisfaction in comparison to non-Pagan employees (Tejeda 2015: 98-99).

In exploring issues of stigmatization and discrimination around Paganism, some scholars have focused their attention on the additional challenges that becoming a parent presents to Pagan individuals. Specifically, Mcclure (2017) addressed the question of how the religiously

marginalized manage stigma as parents. To explore this question, her study focuses on the experiences of parents with no religious affiliation and parents affiliated with Paganism. Both respondents were found to use defensive othering as a strategy to mediate stigmatization. Defensive othering is a strategy that occurs when a stigmatized individual tries to distance themselves from the stereotypes applied to the group they are affiliated with by asserting that the stereotypes do not apply to them specifically (Mcclure 2017:339-340). Pagan parents found the most threatening stereotype applied to them was being hedonistic and sought to portray images of being family friendly and capable of establishing acceptable moral values in their children. Some participants in this study felt the need to hide their Pagan affiliation.

Respondents were less likely to disclose their religious affiliation to other family members and friends if they had fewer financial resources available to them because they relied on those connections to assist with childcare and other related expenses. Pagan parents with more financial resources did not have to worry about losing family assistance and had more options as to where to enroll their children in school. Although this research expressed Pagan parents taught their children how to respond to potential threats of discrimination or bullying, it did not specifically address the extent to which Pagan parents involved their children within their faith (Mcclure 2017: 344-350).

Wilson (2005) conducted a similar study where she interviewed Pagans from a Pagan parenting group to explore what it means to be a Pagan parent. All parents expressed worry over their children experiencing discrimination. However, they ultimately felt that discrimination only had a minor impact on their lives. The author attributes this to the respondent's ability to make life-decisions that lessen exposure to possibilities of discrimination by relocating to more accepting areas and seeking out accepting social connections. All the parents had discussions with their children around discrimination, why it might take place, and how to react to instances of discrimination if they do occur. All parents were invested in teaching their children the values

of Pagan belief. Although more positive, the participants of this study may have had access to more resources (Wilson 2005:51-60).

Additional concerns over potentially experiencing negative custodial actions have also been expressed by Pagan parents. Evidence supporting this fear has been documented by Bradford S. Stewart (2011) who published a law review article that analyzed court cases that he argued were discriminatory towards Pagan parents. In the trial case of Jones vs. Jones, both parents seeking custody were identified as being Wiccan. The Judge ordered that both parents would no longer be allowed to expose their child to their Wiccan beliefs "...framing the child's exposure to a religion that "people might think [involves] Satan" as an impairment to the wellbeing of the child (Bradford 2011:163)." Although this decision was later overturned by an appellate court, it was not done so on constitutional grounds, therefore limiting protection of Pagan parental rights in future court cases (Bradford 2011:163-164).

Other cases that Bradford explores offer evidence of Pagan parents being discredited due to their religious beliefs which are often viewed as detrimental to their child's upbringing while mainstream religious Parents, specifically those of Christian denominations, are considered as being a healthy attribute to their child's upbringing. The mental stability and ability of Pagan parents to provide nurturing and caring homes have been taken into consideration when making decisions towards custodial action. Comments during court cases also show the continued conflation between Satanism and Paganism, despite Paganism having nothing to do with the Satanic religion (Braford 2011:161-172).

Pagan parents are often worried over their children relaying their Pagan practices to outsiders of the religion who may not understand, and misinterpreting their religion make reports to social workers or the police. To remedy this, efforts have been made to provide awareness of Paganism to school educators and counselors as students may face issues of harassment from fellow classmates (Yardley 2008). Despite this fear, ethnographic research has indicated that many Pagan parents pass on their religious teachings to their children oftentimes adapting

religious rituals to be more child friendly. Various Pagan organizations place an emphasis on remaining family friendly, not only to welcome parents and their children, but also to put forth a positive image to non-Pagans and the general public. Organizations have additionally been created specifically for children of Pagan parents. This even includes an organization called Spiral Scouts, similar to boy scouts, but for learning and celebrating Pagan practices while spending time in nature (Kermani 2009).

While many Pagans feel that discrimination and stigmatization have a negative impact on their ability to practice their faith, other additional obstacles have been explored. Reece (2014) conducted a national survey of the Pagan community to understand the prevalence and severity of impediments to practicing Contemporary Paganism. The majority of respondents indicated that the dominant culture's educational system being in conflict with Pagan beliefs was the largest impediment to practicing their religion. The author offers two explanations. The first is the influence of Christians and their ability to insert Christian values into the education system. The second is the educational system's rejection of magic as being real (Reece 2014:158-159). Although 60.8% of her respondents expressed having to hide their faith due to prejudice as an impediment (Reece 2014:160), others indicated more pragmatic issues such as lacking financial resources and the absence of Pagan institutions. Specifically, other issues included inaccessibility of Pagan organizations or gatherings, insufficient time or finances to practice, lack of available clergy, and holidays not being recognized by the workplace (Reece 2014:171-172).

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Setting the Context: Phenomenology

Phenomenology is well suited to qualitative research because it "…focuses on concepts, events, or the lived experiences of humans" that allows for deeper insight into how people come to understand and interpret a particular phenomenon in their lives (Saldana 2011, 7-8). The phenomenological movement began with the two-part publication of Edmund Husserl's Logical Investigations in 1900 and 1901. In his later writings, Husserl believed that the correct approach to philosophical problems was to consult "the things themselves" as opposed to relying on mere speculation (Overgaard & Zahavi 2008:93-94).

Husserl argued that the traditional notion of the mind as an inner, self-contained realm is not accurate, but that the mind acts upon the objects external to it, which he refers to as "intentionality". In later publications, Husserl extended this argument by saying that the world is constituted by this type of consciousness or "transcendental subjectivity" (Husserl et al., 2001; Overgaard & Zahavi 2008:94). The world, in other words, cannot be conceived of independently of a world-cognizing subject; and human beings cannot be understood independently from their subjective experiences of the world they are situated in. Husserl's successor, Martin Heidegger, continued this same argument, but placed greater emphasis on the practical, mundane involvement and experience of human beings as agents with their environments (Overgaard & Zahavi 2008:93-94).

Husserl and other phenomenologists often emphasize the importance of the "life-world," that familiar world we construct from our experiences that we often take for granted and rarely question. Alfred Schutz, considered the founder of phenomenological sociology, gives particular attention to the life world and its social structure (Overgaard & Zahavi 2008:99). Schutz claims that navigating the life world involves a process of typification, fashioning categories to sort out and make sense of our lives and the worlds we inhabit. These typifications and their

accompanying categories develop in the context of everyday life, our life with the material and the social (Overgaard & Zahavi 2008:99-107; Schutz et al 2006).

In other words, "We perceive, experience and understand in accordance with normal and typical structures, models, and patterns, which previous experiences have inscribed into our subjective lives (Overgaard & Zahavi 2008:106)." As we interact with others and the social world around us, we learn what actions and behaviors are considered normal and acceptable in everyday life. This process exists as a form of social control that leads people to conform to the existing norms found within their society. These socially constructed subjective understandings provide us with maps to navigate the worlds around us (Overgaard & Zahavi 2008:106).

The Life History Method

Life history method has been used in a wide array of disciplines. It evolved from oral history and other ethnographic field approaches (Atkinson 2002) with the first recorded life histories being collected by anthropologists capturing the narratives of Native American chiefs at the beginning of the 20th century (Goodson 2001). Psychologists have also made use of the life history method to understand development and personality. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation and application of theory to individual case studies containing life narratives have been credited as one of the first serious academic studies involving the life history method (Atkinson 2002). Additionally, the life history method was often favored by those researching marginal identities, such as feminist researchers, those exploring sexuality, and education researchers. This is primarily due to its ability to give voice to silenced or private lives (Goodson 2001).

The life history method has experienced fluctuations in its popularity within sociology and the humanities. The first major sociological work employing this method was Thomas & Znaniecki's publication of The Polish Peasant in Europe & America in the 1920s. Thomas & Znaniecki relied primarily on the autobiographies of migrants to capture the experiences of

Polish peasants migrating to the United States. This publication legitimized life history as a research method. Several studies utilizing this method subsequently came out of what came to be known as the Chicago School of Sociology, furthering its popularity. By the 1930s life history method hit its peak. For decades it was used only sparingly, until a minor resurgence in the 1970s within deviancy research. Some notable publications, such as Bertaux's Biography & Society (1981) Plummer's Documents of Life (2000) and Tierney's Qualitative Inquiry (1998) helped fuel the resurgence of the life history method.

Although the life history method has not been entirely abandoned, it has never become a typical research method within sociology. It has often been critiqued for its inability to produce objective statistical results, its lack of generalizability, and being an extensive and time-consuming process in comparison to other methodologies. This has been linked to the historical emergence of sociology as a discipline pushing to be viewed as a legitimate and professional science. As sociology moved away from its focus on providing detailed information of communities, institutions, and organizations towards a focus on developing abstract theory and studies that produced definitive results, the life history method languished. This shift towards establishing a professional sociology has resulted in sociology neglecting methodologies that do not produce generalizable results regardless of what methodologies such as life history have to offer (Goodson 2001).

The life history method is a useful portal into the lives, the lived experiences, of those who are stereotyped or misunderstood, such as those who follow Pagan religions. It prompts interviewees to provide first-person narratives of their lives. What words or vocabularies do they deploy to describe and frame their experiences and understandings of who and what they are in the world? Allowing a person to tell her or his own story gives the investigator a close-up look at human existence, at the existential. Atkinson (2002) asserts that the life history method is perhaps the most effective method in gaining an understanding of how someone's sense of self has evolved over time in response to the complex worlds she or he transverses. He explains

that this is because the self is defined as "an ongoing story, or creative interpretation" (Atkinson 2002:11). Through hearing someone's life story, the researcher can obtain useful information in understanding a participant's self-identity (Atkinson 2002).

There are several strengths to this methodological design. This study employs an idiographic approach towards generating knowledge as opposed to relying on the nomothetic. Philosopher Windhelm Windelband first introduced the concepts of ideographic and nomothetic in 1894 during a series of addresses given in Strasbourg (Windelband, W & Oakes, G 1980) The nomothetic approach strives to establish a generalizable knowledge of reality. In contrast, ideographic approaches seek to offer thick descriptions of an individual's unique, or particular, experience (Windelband, W & Oakes, G 1980, Salvatore & Valsiner 2010). The nomothetic is often associated with quantitative inquiry and the ideographic with qualitative methods (Salvatore & Valsiner 2010). It is the ideographic, or the unique experiences of my participants with the Broom Closet, or deciding to hide or disclose Pagan identity, that I am most interested in capturing.

Due to the nature of the life history method, these interviews capture the ideographic experience by providing rich and detailed information surrounding the lived experiences of Pagans, including life in and out of the Broom Closet and how they navigate and understand the risks of stigmatized identities. Employing the targeted life history method also allowed for further exploration of unexpected information provided by the participant that could not have been anticipated due to currently limited research. Developing such detailed information is beneficial when little academic information presently exists on the topic of Paganism. It also has the potential to inform issues of discrimination and stigmatization more generally and inform future research endeavors surrounding topics related to Paganism. Allowing Pagans to offer their own interpretations and understandings of the topics within this thesis also gives voice to a community that is not often heard from and is typically dismissed and stereotyped.

With these guiding concepts in mind, I adapted and used a qualitative targeted life history approach grounded in phenomenology, or the lived experiences of Pagans. Comprehensive life histories seek to offer holistic accounts of the vast complexities of human lives. For this project, however, I used a more focused, topical approach to the life history method. Specifically, I target the detailed lived experiences of Pagans who must find some way or ways to manage their highly suspect identities. To accomplish this, I asked them to share their specific life history starting with how they initially came to Paganism, and how their experiences within the Broom Closet evolved until present day.

Data Collection and Analysis

To experience Paganism is to have words, vocabularies for understanding and living it. Guided by the ideas of phenomenology, I collected personal, targeted life narratives of Pagan experiences. I wanted participants' words to convey their personal treks through the mazeway of Pagan lives. Specifically, I am interested in the words they use to understand and define their stigmatized identity. Focusing on their own individual interpretations of their lived experiences has allowed for greater insight into how they navigate life as a Pagan; and it lights-up the contextual factors that they identify and think about when deciding whether to disclose their unconventional identities to others. This approach also allowed me to understand how Pagans make sense of and adjust their day-to-day lives to the varied reactions of non-Pagans to their beliefs and practices.

My data consists of in-depth interviews that capture the experiences of my participants starting from when they became Pagan and focuses on their journey through the trials and tribulations of stigma and their relationship with the Broom Closet. Some basic open-ended questions were used to prompt the interviewees to provide their own narratives around the specific issues being explored (Plummer 2011). Most of the interview narratives, however, were participant-led. That is, I framed my questions, as the interviews unfolded, around the varied

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kinds of stories and vignettes I was hearing. Thus, interview protocols were situationally based, emerging from the words I was hearing as our discussions proceeded. Due to the lack of academic data on the lived experiences of Pagans, it was critical to allow my participants to offer their own narratives, their own stories in their own words.

Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, it was not feasible for me to conduct interviews face-to-face. All interviews took place virtually. Five out of 6 of the interviews were conducted via video calls on platforms of the participants choosing. One of the interviews was conducted solely through email exchange to accommodate one of the participants' hearing disabilities. Interviews lasted between 1 to 3 hours. Once interviews were completed, they were transcribed, and a copy of the transcript was offered to the participants with an invitation to correct or clarify any of the information that they initially offered in the interview. No substantial feedback was received from participants that required alterations to the transcripts. After the transcription was read by the participants, I coded the interviews by hand looking for themes that invited interpretation and analysis related to my research questions.

Sampling Frame

I used non-random snowball sampling to obtain participants. Since Pagans often conceal their identity, identifying participants would have been difficult without having someone to offer a referral. Having personal connections with those who identify as Pagan provided me with opportunities to reach out to other members within the Pagan community. In order to find participants, I asked personal contacts already affiliated with the Pagan community to reach out to those who might be interested in speaking with me. Additionally, I posted to my own personal social media accounts. Through these accounts I invited anyone who identified as Pagan--and willing to speak to me about their experiences with Paganism--to contact me about participation in this study or to share my contact information with others.

Initially I had hoped to obtain a total of 9 participants. However, some originally identified participants did not feel comfortable interacting in a virtual setting and declined participation in the study. In the end, a total of 6 participants were willing to speak with me. During the initial conversation to schedule the interview, I asked participants what path they practiced, how long they have been Pagan, and where they were in relation to the Broom Closet. The purpose of these questions was to gain background information prior to speaking with participants and to determine if participants were either in or out of the Broom Closet. Participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they may end the interview or refuse to answer any questions at any time. I explained that during the interview I was hoping to hear their life story around their journey to and through the Broom Closet. I explained that except for a few guiding questions, most of the interview would be based on what they were interested in speaking to me about. Each participant was initially asked to tell me how they came to Paganism and the interviews evolved from there.

Of the 6 participants included in this study, 2 had never entered the Broom Closet, 1 had been in the closet and since exited, 2 were in between, being closeted or out depending on the social context, and the final participant identified as being firmly in the Broom Closet. Participants described themselves as predominantly white (5 out of 6) and female (4 out of 6). Three of the participants identified as Druid, 1 of the participants identified as Wiccan, 1 identified as an Eclectic Witch, and 1 identified as a Jewish Witch. This information is demonstrated in Table 1. Participant Demographic Information.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Race	Gender	Pagan Affiliation	Relation to Broom Closet
Belle	White	Female	Jewish Witch	In Between
George	White	Male	Druid	Out
Jasmine	Black	Female	Wiccan	Closeted
JE	White	Female	Eclectic Witch	In Between
Saoirse	White	Female	Druid	Out
Xenn	White	Male	Druid	Out

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS – PAGANS SPEAK

Becoming Pagan

The first question asked of all participants was how they became Pagan. Although each participant had a unique journey that brought them to their present faith, 3 main themes emerged: Dissatisfaction with mainstream religion, spiritual experiences at a young age, and a sense of "coming home" when they discovered Paganism.

Spiritual Experiences at a Young Age

Five of the 6 participants discussed having spiritual or supernatural experiences at an early age in life which helped lead them to a Pagan practice when they were older. George, JE, Xenn, and Jasmine described feeling a connection to Pagan spirits or deities when they were younger. George provided the least detail around his earlier encounters but said that he "started off believing in Pagan spirits when he was around 13 or 14." JE recounted that as a child she "always found a sort of fascination with Auset" who is a Goddess of the ancient Egyptian pantheon and would read any books she could find about the Egyptian Goddess. Prior to discovering her Pagan path, JE had an experience that called her back to the Egyptian pantheon that she had been fascinated with as a child:

> A few weeks before I was on my path, I had found a plug (I stretch my ears) that had been missing for the longest time. They had fallen out in my sleep and of course, particularly because they were my favorite pair, I ripped my bedroom apart. Took the bed apart, found only one! Considered the one lost for good and it stayed that way for a few months. Until a few weeks before I realized my path, I was doing laundry and heard a weird noise. In the bottom of the washer, surprisingly it was the plug I had lost. And they were bloodstone - one of Auset's correspondences. I'm positive something else had happened right around then but I can't quite remember but it felt as if Auset was trying to be all "HELLO I AM STILL RIGHT HERE"

Xenn shared the most vivid account of his spiritual encounters when he was younger. Xenn underwent open heart surgery on three separate occasions as a child. During the last two surgeries, when he was 18 months old and 7 years old, he had out of body experiences. He recalls the following:

> I have extremely vivid memories of the experience of looking down at my body as I'm on the operating table and then when I got up to walk a little bit away, I was in this open meadow glen surrounded by trees and there is this absolutely stunning woman who, as I recall her now I don't have words to describe how beautiful she is. And she just told me that it wasn't time yet and I had things I had to learn, so I walked myself back into my body. And then I had another similar experience when I was 7 which was my last surgery. I spoke to two Goddesses and a God who all told me that I had things that I had to accomplish, and I had things that I had to do. So, I mean, from that point I was essentially Pagan. I just didn't have the words to be able to say it yet.

Jasmine also provided a more detailed account of her childhood experience where she says she began to "rely on the voice of Spirit when [she] was a latch key kid." Jasmine describes Spirit as an intuitive voice that she has had access to since she was young. Spirit would tell her things before they occurred or would provide warnings to keep her from dangerous situations. As she grew older, she began to question what Spirit was for her, and began reading about clairaudience, defined as "the power or faculty of hearing something not present to the ear but regarded as having objective reality." Her research eventually led her to the discovery of Witchcraft and Wicca, where she connected Spirit with being a part of the divine.

Belle's account differed slightly from the other participants. She does not describe having any experience with any sort of Pagan spirit or deity necessarily but describes an encounter with what she describes as the "supernatural." This encounter was so striking to her that she explains that it fundamentally changed her understanding of the world:

I believed in witches, and I believed in witchcraft. And I believed in the powers of nature

and the supernatural when I was like 4. And I remember believing in the supernatural

because I knew I saw my grandfather's ghost. And like whether it be just my imagination

as a child who had recently lost her grandfather or this desire to see him again. Or

whether there was something actually there ...it changed something in my understanding

of the world.

Dissatisfaction with Mainstream Religions: "But Christianity Just Didn't Fit Me Anymore"

All participants expressed their dissatisfactions with mainstream religions for various

reasons. There were two main themes that arose from speaking with participants. 4 out of 6

participants discussed how they associated Christianity with being too controlling. 3 out of 6

participants discussed how they were unable to obtain satisfactory answers when they

questioned Christianity to gain a better understanding of its theology.

Participants took issue with how they perceived mainstream religions, primarily

Christianity, as being an implement of control for various reasons. This is unsurprising given

Paganism's classification as a counterculture movement against mainstream societal norms

(Magliocco 2004, Adler 1986). Each participant brought a unique perspective as to how they

found mainstream monotheistic religions, primarily Christianity, to control behavior and thought.

JE only briefly spoke around the topic of associating Christianity with control. She shares

that, "The idea of one God being the being that controlled everything in the world wasn't

something that made much sense to me." She shares that since she did not grow up in a

religious household, that the absence of mainstream religion provided her the freedom "to kind

of explore and believe whatever [she] wanted to."

Two participants, George and Jasmine, spoke to Christianity specifically being a form of

patriarchal social control that did not fall in line with their personal views towards gender

equality. For George, he saw Christianity as less concerned with redemption, health, faith and

more focused on patriarchal control. He explains in the following:

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To me it was more people making up something so that they could control people vs. actually a religion. Which was really echoed when I started looking at the patriarchal nature of Christianity. That's when it really came to me because you look at all the way back through history and there's always been women who have been empowered one way or another, but in Christianity not so much. They kind of talk them down. It just didn't feel right…I became Pagan because it gives me the freedom to believe what makes sense to me.

Jasmine echoed this sentiment during her interview. When sharing her experience with Christianity, she says, "There was this very patriarchal ideology. It was very patriarch centered and I felt like I was at the background of my own practice and spirituality...there it is… I was the passenger to my own spirituality."

Jasmine discussed several experiences and perceptions of patriarchal control while she was still participating in Christianity. Some of these examples included her own Church excluding female pastors from paid positions, denial of sexual freedoms, and the condemnation and exclusion of the LGBTQ and Trans community. Jasmine could not reconcile a religious community who professed following a benevolent and loving God with also being a community that condemned groups of people that she had personal, and positive, connections with. This disconnect was one of the motivating factors that led her to walk away from Christianity. In her words:

I cannot believe in someone that's supposed to love me who would screw me like that and then I was like holy shit that whole thing is dumb and then I was like that whole thing is literally made to control people…and then my husband and me would get into these deep conversations about it and we were like oh is this something that's controlling the hell out of us? Are we just in something to give money to? Are we no longer believing in any of this anti trans, sometimes anti Black, anti-women [ideology].

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For both George and Jasmine, the act of leaving Christianity behind provided them with the freedom to interact with an alternative religious culture, one that supported their commitments to inclusivity and gender equality. Xenn's view of mainstream monotheistic religion differs from that of George and Jasmine. In my interview with Xenn he stressed the importance he ascribed to the goal of personal self-sufficiency and taking concrete action in accordance with a person's religious beliefs. He offered the following dialogue in relation to control and self-sufficiency:

Paganism is a path to self-efficiency. A true Pagan should be working towards being as self-sufficient as they physically can be…. Everybody's got those individual skills and it's the celebration of those individual skills coming together for the tribe that creates true self sufficiency, but that goes against modern consumer culture. And anything that goes against modern consumer culture goes against the massive political socioeconomic machine that keeps the poor people poor and the rich people rich and the rich people don't want to not be rich, so anything that they can do to divide the people be it race wars, be it well look at those fucking Pagans over there worshipping the devil. Be it look at those Muslims over there they're burning your American flag. It's all fucking smoke and mirrors.

For Xenn, self-sufficiency personally manifests through his contributions to the community that he lives with on the property that he refers to as the grove. Here Xenn gardened, raised animals, and also hunted to provide for his family who in turn made their own individual contributions. These were not only ways to maintain self-sufficiency, but also allowed Xenn the personal freedom to practice his faith. Drawing from what he described as various "historical proto-indo-European hunter and gatherer cultures", Xenn tried to recreate as much of their practices as he could in a modern context. Xenn described these activities, particularly hunting, as being a means of feeling close to nature, Gods, and the spirits.

Outside of their aversion towards mainstream religion being a form of social control, all participants who were raised in a Christian family simply did not feel as if Christianity could provide satisfactory answers to their religious and spiritual questions. Participants who were raised in Christian families came to the conclusion that Christianity was unable to provide answers to, what for them, were fundamental questions. Their heartfelt questions unanswered, they began to doubt the religion they had been raised in. Saoirse recalled the following experience:

I remember asking my priest 'Can you please explain to me how transubstantiation works?' I was about 16. He couldn't explain it to me. I'm like, I have problems with the religion where there are aspects that I just don't know or understand. It's one thing where we all joke around how you know the Gods have their plan. That's above our paygrade. That's fine. I can understand that, but I wanted at that point in my life to understand well how does transubstantiation work? I'm not gonna take it on faith alone. I really need to understand how does this work, where this wafer suddenly becomes the body of Jesus. I didn't understand it and I didn't get a satisfactory answer. That was why I left Catholicism.

George describes a similar experience:

The more I studied the more questions I had… I had a couple of friends that taught at seminary in Wake Forest. And I was good friends with the preacher and he was still going to seminary for some things, so I could ask him. And I came up with some questions and basically they told me well you just have to believe on faith. And I can't do that. I'm an engineer. I have to break things down and see how they work. And further I went, the more I began to believe that Christianity was just a bunch of crap.

Jasmine was also unable to obtain any answers when she questioned Christian theology and why her Church was teaching its congregation to not accept other minority populations. Jasmine also concluded that "nothing made freaking sense." Receiving unsatisfactory answers,

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or no answers at all, led all three participants down a path to seeking a new religion that could better provide them with an understanding of the world that mirrored their own personal views.

Coming Home

All participants described coming to Paganism as something that simply made sense to them; it provided them with a new vocabulary and way of understanding past experiences. Xenn succinctly sums up this process by saying, "I pretty much always [have] been Pagan. I just didn't have words for it until I was in my early teens." George also shared how Paganism brought him back to when he was younger, and how it provided him a framework to "believe what [made] sense to [him]. Finding Paganism also allowed JE and Jasmine the ability to put words to their past experiences. JE discussed how it explained her connection to Egyptian mythology as a child and provided her a framework for understanding how she had always honored the deities found within that Pantheon. For Jasmine it explained her connections to Spirit energy and to the moon, often a symbol of the female divine in Paganism, as she describes in the following:

I was like well all those nights of me swimming under the moon talking to it makes a lot of sense now. So, then that's when I was like... again I followed the spirit I followed the energy and the entity that has always been with me and found me to my people.

Saoirse, who tried very hard to continue practicing Christianity in some form, finally realized that for her the practice felt very hollow, and no longer meant anything to her "in a deep down emotional spiritual level." After spending a great deal of time studying Paganism, she says:

I just decided you know what? This feels right. This just seems like the thing to do. Let me just try it. Let me see how it feels for me and it initially felt a lot like coming home and it was a good feeling. I finally felt like I found a spiritual practice that meant something to me.

During the interview, Belle also discusses how she has always felt connected to witchcraft even as a small child. Learning about witchcraft led Belle to draw connections

between it and Jewish rituals that she practiced with her family. The connections that she

discovered provided her a deeper understanding of Judaic rituals, as she explains:

> I started making these connections between witchcraft Paganism and my own religion
>
> and my own spirituality, whether it be I thought that I saw a ghost when I was 5 years old
>
> or asking too many questions about certain cultural things like lighting candles on
>
> Shabbat, why we do certain rituals every day it was kind of like well that's magic and
>
> then people would be like no it's just tradition. Well like okay in that tradition is this type
>
> of magic that we see and feel. We feel connected to our ancestry. We feel connected to
>
> our people, and I found these connections of spirituality within my religion and my
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> cultural traditions that I then kind of connected back and forth between Judaism and
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> Paganism. And that has been something that I've been exploring more and more as I've
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> gotten older.

In and Out of the Broom Closet

Perceptions of the Broom Closet

Four of 6 participants associated the Broom Closet with feelings of shame or guilt. Two

of the participants within this study have never experienced entering the Broom Closet

themselves. Instead of being asked about their experiences with being in the Broom Closet,

they were asked about what came to mind when they heard the phrase "Broom Closet". Both

George and Xenn said it recalled feelings of shame. They both discussed how they believed

Pagans in the Broom Closet feel shame to admit who they are to non-Pagan people because

they are aware of the stigma associated with being Pagan.

 Xenn specifically elects not to use the term Broom Closet due to the negative

connotations of shame he associates with it. Both participants, however, expressed they did

understand that some Pagans may be afraid to admit who they are to other people due to the

stigma associated with Paganism. George said he knows, "some people have been criticized

and they are trying to avoid confrontation." Being someone who is comfortable with confrontation, he continues to discuss how he believes if, "you truly believe who you are you don't give a damn about the confrontation."

While Xenn has a negative view of the Broom Closet, he still adds that there are possible benefits to the Broom Closet's existence. Xenn talks about how the act of coming out of the Broom Closet can be a function of normalizing Paganism and eliminating the shame people may feel:

If using the term in the Broom Closet and coming out of the Broom Closet helps to clear away the shame that people feel about it and normalize being Pagan, I'm all about it. I won't use it, but I'm all about the idea of normalization of being Pagan.

Other participants also associated feelings of shame or guilt with being in the Broom Closet. Saoirse stayed in the Broom Closet for a long time with her family due to what she described as "Catholic guilt" for turning away from Catholicism. She describes feeling ashamed to come out to her Catholic family and fearing possible rejection from them. Belle also questions whether "being in the Broom Closet is a form of shame." Belle challenges the idea of the Broom Closet further. Although she never provides a possible answer, she does raise the question of whether the Broom Closet is also a source of empowerment for some people:

I think that when we own certain terms and we identify with certain terms it gives us power and brings us to a better understanding of ourselves. And so... I wonder if people who recognize them hiding that part of themselves as being in the Broom Closet… does that give them some sort of power even though they do hide that part of themselves from the world or is being in the Broom Closet a form of shame?

Belle offers an additional insight into the Broom Closet. When discussing Pagans being closeted about their identities, Belle also shares that she believes that most Pagans are not necessarily in the closet. She discusses how she feels that Pagans are present in a lot of

communities, and although they may not advertise their faith due to it being stigmatized, they are not exactly hiding it either:

> I feel that even though the craft and Paganism are in a lot of communities, and it's just not necessarily spoken about and I don't think that people always are hiding it necessarily they're just not open about it. Because they think that people might make fun of them they might use terms like woo woo um they might um make it seem as if spirituality isn't some form of ...like they won't. What's the word I'm looking for? They won't ...they won't like authorize it. They won't give it like the respect or the um ...they won't show that they really accept it. They just brush it off like oh okay you're crazy. Even though every religion if you really break it down can be construed as crazy.

Self-Acceptance

Three out of 6 Participants who came out of the Broom Closet, discussed how self-acceptance and gaining confidence in their knowledge of their practice were some of the key factors that led to their comfortability of disclosing their identity to others. Saoirse, Belle, and JE all shared how when they first began to practice Paganism, they were not as open to discussing their experiences with other people. As they became more familiar and knowledgeable in their faith, it gave them the confidence to start having conversations with others. JE shares how uncertainty of what she was really doing when she first became Pagan kept her from being open with others:

> When I first started on my path, I was definitely unsure of what I was doing so I wasn't as open with it. It's a very personal thing to me so before I kind of had my footing, I didn't talk about it as much even with my spouse. Who is definitely supportive about my spirituality. So, it's fair to say that it's grown with my confidence in my path.

Saoirse discusses how when she first came to Paganism, she followed the Wiccan path. Wicca did not ultimately suit her, as she describes it as a "steppingstone to real Paganism." She says, "As I got older, and especially once I found Druidry, I just got more comfortable in my own

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skin, and I got more balanced. I became much more comfortable with telling people I am Pagan." It wasn't until she started studying Druidry that she felt as if she had truly found her spiritual home. This experience combined with a growing self-acceptance led her out of the Broom Closet:

> I'm just at a point in my life with enough self-love and self-acceptance that I'm like...whatever. You don't like it. I'm not going to make you practice it. You don't want to be around me because you don't like it, buzz off.

Belle also focuses on how self-acceptance allowed her to be more open about her spiritual practices. For her, part of beginning to accept herself took place by witnessing other Pagans accepting themselves and being open about their faith. Her discussion mirrors Xenn and George's thoughts around normalization of Paganism:

> There have been times where I've kind of denied it and just said oh no I'm just spiritual or whatever. I mean there are times where I'll like still kind of say that, but as I have found more and more people who also accept themselves as witches or practicing pagans or whatever. I've really found myself accepting myself.

Accepting Social Supports

One of the primary similarities between all participants who are out of the Broom Closet is that they have some form of accepting social support. Five out of 6 participants shared positive experiences of having family and friends who are receptive, if not supportive, of their Pagan identities. All participants who discussed having positive social support are now out of the Broom Closet in most contexts.

Xenn and JE specifically discuss how they were not raised in very religious households. Because of this, they described how they were able to engage with other religions when they were young without experiencing any conflict with their family. JE says, "I don't come from a religious family in any sense of the word, so I was free to kind of explore and believe whatever I wanted to." Xenn specifically shares how his family was also supportive of him exploring other

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religions. He talks about how his parents told him that he was free to believe whatever he wanted to believe, as long as he researched and demonstrated an understanding of the religion he was pursuing. Xenn describes that to achieve this, they would often have him write research papers on the religion he was interested in:

> I was raised that if I wanted to be a religion, I needed to know about the religion. I needed to study the religion. And I needed to practice the religion. … When I told my parents that I wanted to be Shinto they said okay well write a paper that tells us that you know what Shinto is and what its practices are and what its beliefs are and then start practicing it and at that point you can call yourself whatever you want. And so, every time I wanted to talk to my parents about being a new religion they would make me write a paper about it and I would gladly write a paper about it and teach myself about it and work with the tenants of learning that particular religion.

Participants who grew up in a religious family and are out of the Broom Closet about their Paganism, had a slightly different experience. Saoirse, George, and Belle share similar stories of how their families do not fully understand Paganism or their choice to engage with it. Regardless of their lack of understanding, and differing religious beliefs, their family still accepts them. For the most part, participants describe coming to an "agree to disagree" understanding with their family.

George, never feeling the need to hide his Paganism, discusses how he informed his parents that he was Pagan. George describes having many religious conversations with his parents to explain his religious beliefs. Through these conversations they have become more understanding of what Paganism is, but due to their own religious beliefs, they still worry that he is going to hell. Despite this, George explains that they are still accepting of him and that they do not actually condemn him for his beliefs:

> Regardless of what I was doing or how far I took it he wanted me to go to Heaven to be with the rest of the family. That's why he prayed for me. He wasn't that he felt like I was

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doing something evil, he didn't feel like I was doing what it took to go to Heaven. So he

didn't condemn me for it.

Saoirse, raised by a Catholic family, at first hid her Paganism from her parents. She was

uncertain how they would react when they first found out. The first person she told was her

"Pagan friendly" mother. Upon telling her mother, she realized that her mother had already

realized that her daughter was Pagan and did not take any issue with it. Telling her father was

more difficult, as she describes him as being a devout Catholic. Although she says that he still

does not understand Paganism, he still accepts and respects her religious choices. She recalls

the following:

> I told my dad and my dad was the hardest one to tell because my dad is a very devout
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> Catholic and he doesn't to this day he doesn't understand it. But he does respect it
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> because as he put to me my religion teaches me that you love everybody. You're my
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> daughter. I love you. Just the way you are. So we have agreed to disagree. I respect his
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> religion and he respects mine. I can't ask for more than that.

Belle has had discussions with her family about her spiritual beliefs, but she says that

she has not fully shared with her family that she is a Witch. During the interview she admits that

she isn't entirely sure what their perception is of her religious beliefs due to her often alluding to

them, but not specifically defining them. Although Belle was raised in a Jewish family, she does

not share that she is concerned about her family rejecting her due to her spiritual beliefs but is

more concerned about them taking her less seriously or thinking she is weird. Despite this, Belle

describes how her family has always been open to anything she wanted to discuss but would

not pry into her personal beliefs or try to impede her in any way. Her family has never prohibited

her from exploring Witchcraft and would even buy her tools for her craft. Belle explains that they

never viewed her interests as evil and if she wasn't harming anyone, they took no issue with it:

> Yeah it's not like they were open armed, oh show me what you do or anything, but that
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> was kind of like anything in my life. As long as I wanted to share something with them

they would let me share it, but they didn't ask questions or impede in any way. If I wanted to go to that store they would take me. If I wanted something they would buy it for me. It's not like they would be like oh you want this crystal to do magic stuff? You're not allowed to have it because that's evil. They would never do that.

Outside of having support from their immediate family members, the same participants discussed having additional social support through friends and connection to other communities, whether affiliated with Paganism or not. All participants discussed how they tend to surround themselves with people who tend to be more open and accepting of others. This often took place through individual friends and friend groups, online communities, and interacting with Pagan communities. One sentiment that emerged throughout interviews was that if someone could not accept a participant for their religious views, participants preferred to cut ties with that person and not allow it to affect them personally.

Jasmine, who considers herself fully in the Broom Closet, also discussed the importance of maintaining some form of social connection with others. Although Jasmine is very guarded about sharing her identity, she discusses how establishing social connection is important to her overall wellbeing, especially since she cannot have that kind of connection with her own family. As she shares her sadness about hiding her identity from her family, she says, "I would say if anybody is in the closet I would just say find friends. Find somebody that you can actually talk to. Don't be alone in every area of your life." In order to maintain social connection, Jasmine participates in online communities where her identity can be kept safe. On very rare occasion, she has also made connections with Pagan individuals that she has already deemed as safe to come out to.

Process of Disclosure

All participants shared how they either advertise or hide their Pagan identities. Many discussed using their own signaling process to convey to others they were Pagan. Participants

shared how their signaling process was sometimes different depending on the social context and where they are in relation to the Broom Closet.

Participants Xenn and George, both out of the Broom Closet, had mostly similar attitudes towards disclosing their Pagan identities to others. Both participants shared how they had never felt uncomfortable with other people knowing they are Pagan. Xenn often wears jewelry or clothing when he is in public that signals his Pagan identity. When discussing how he has never been in the Broom Closet, Xenn says "I didn't hide mine. I wear mine and wore mine openly on my sleeve. I need to get it tattooed on my forehead. I'm Pagan." George also describes his openness with his religion, even having a Pagan salutation included on his work email. George believes if he were to try and hide his Paganism, it would only attract negative attention because people would eventually realize he was being deceitful about something and would try and find out what it is. He explains:

> If you're concerned that somebody's going to find out your Pagan, they're going to. If you're not, if you're right in their face, you don't care, they're not going to worry about it, they're not even going to think about it twice. Because you know, you get that feeling sometimes. He's hiding something. It's exactly the same thing. If you're in the closet if you don't want somebody to know for some reason, you're scared your boss is gonna find out. Well, boss is gonna find out. And if you're right up in your boss' face hey man what's going on? What's he got to worry about? Nothing. Because you're there, you're doing what you're supposed to be doing and everything else, so they're not going to notice then.

Both Xenn and George also expressed that if ever confronted or threatened due to their being Pagan, they were unafraid to defend themselves if necessary. When asked if he had ever been in the Broom Closet, George describes himself as having been a "rough individual" when he was younger. He also shares that, "People don't intimidate me in the slightest. You challenge me and I get right up in your face. So, in answering your questions, no I never felt that I needed

to hide from anybody." Xenn also presents himself as someone who is not easily intimidated or afraid of confrontation:

> You start trying to infringe upon the way that I want to live my life...well..we know what's going to happen. But there's no tenant of nonviolence in Paganism. There's a tenant of intelligent violence. Violence when violence is necessary. Violence is necessary to defend yourself, your faith, and your family.

Throughout the interview, Xenn stressed the importance of acting in accordance with your religion and following any existing tenants. This same idea surfaces during George's interview while he is discussing his experience with not being in the Broom Closet. He shares how he has been very active in the Pagan community, being an ordained minister, serving on committees and participating in Pagan events. He describes other Pagans he has known as being "…Pagan their whole life and have never done anything other than just be Pagan and try to hide it." Comparing his experience to theirs, George believes his openness about Paganism and active involvement in Pagan events has helped him to normalize being Pagan for himself, and others as well. He explains:

> I'm more normalized to being upfront about who I am. And I know how to represent myself when I talk to other people. Somebody who's not used to making these quote un quote confessions. They're probably a little nervous, they're probably I'm Pagan you know I don't know if I can tell you this or what you're going to do or how you're going to react. I'm like I'm Pagan what the hell are you gonna do about it? So it makes a big difference to me.

JE discusses how even though she is out of the Broom Closet, she still doesn't "shout from the rooftop" that she is Pagan, but will also answer honestly if questioned about her religious affiliation, as she explains:

I have absolutely no problem discussing it. It's not something I'm ashamed of because it's a piece of who I am. Paganism has given me a huge sense of inner peace that I hadn't had before so I'm definitely not going to hide it to appease someone else.

Since coming out of the Broom Closet, Saoirse also talks about how it no longer bothers her to share her Pagan identity with others. During the interview she shares how when filling out her religious affiliation on hospital forms, she's even "happy to put Pagan" and that it "doesn't bother [her] anymore."

Another form of signaling that 3 out of 6 participants discussed engaging in was wearing accessories to signal their Paganism to others. Xenn, Belle, and JE all said sometimes they choose to either wear clothing or jewelry advertising their Paganism. JE, who says she occasionally wears a pentagram necklace in public, says it "definitely opens the conversation sometimes" with other people about her Pagan identity. Belle also discusses how she shares her Witch identity through her clothing and accessories saying "if people pay attention, they know who [she] is." She talks about how even though she wears jewelry signifying her Pagan identity, she still has uncertainty about whether people do perceive her as a Witch:

I rarely wear my Star of David necklace in comparison to a cauldron necklace or a sigil necklace or something other alchemical in nature or a pin that basically screams I'm a witch. I wore a shirt to school and it's witch witch you're a witch from practical magic. And somebody in the hallway was like I love your shirt! I was like thanks because they knew it was from the movie, but like do they also know I'm a witch?

Participants described themselves as not always being as forthcoming about their Pagan identities with others. They discussed different processes they sometimes engaged in prior to disclosing their identities. One main theme that emerged during interviews was identifying safe people to come out to. For some, this involved managing what type of people participants wanted to be surrounded by. Saoirse, Belle, and Jasmine all shared how they associated with more accepting friend groups. Although Saoirse initially stayed in the Broom Closet from her

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family, she was always out to her friends who she described as "Pagan friendly" and having "no problems with her spiritual practices."

Belle and Jasmine also share their intentionality behind surrounding themselves with accepting and diverse friend groups. When asked to share about her experiences coming out as a Witch to others, Belle responded most instances had been positive. She explains this is "because of the people that [she] associates with whether it be finding people, friends online, in school, through work or [she] seem[s] to attract more accepting people." Jasmine also discusses how although she is in the Broom Closet, she still "makes a rich community in another life and another place" by surrounding herself with other people, mostly other Pagans on the internet, who will clearly be accepting of her Paganism.

Some participants also discussed how they would identify someone as being a safe person to share their identity with prior to disclosing. Belle, possessing two stigmatized identities, discusses how she uses one to determine if the second is safe to share. Belle is very vocal about her Jewish identity and uses others' reactions to it as a means to gauge whether it may also be safe to share her Witch identity. She describes how sharing her Jewish identity with other people sometimes leaves her "already othered enough" leading her to the decision to remain in the Broom Closet. If people are more accepting, she explains, "Maybe then if they accept me as a Jewish woman then they can know that I'm a Witch too."

Jasmine extensively discusses having only shared her identity with two other people in her personal life outside of her husband. She describes coming out as being "a terrible experience every time" even though she shares positive outcomes. The two people she came out to turned out to be Pagan, but she was initially uncertain about their identities in the beginning. She describes a process of building trust through sharing particular phrases and interests to determine whether the other person was safe to come out to. She shared information in such a way to provide clues that would signal to someone familiar with Paganism she is a Witch. If they were not familiar with Paganism, it still informed her how someone may

react to her hidden identity. In the interview she referred to it as "the secret ways you uncover people." She would use phrases such as "I'm spiritual" and ask questions such as, "are you a candle lover?" or do you "talk to the moon?" She describes how this process eventually led her to share her identity:

> We were like dancing around each other. We didn't really clearly say the words, but we both knew that we were both very spiritual people. And then somebody said the word Witch. Somebody said it. I don't remember who and the other person was like okay they said it. I can say it now too. You know what I'm saying? You use the cloak, you use lighter phrases, more digestible phrases. I'm a spiritual person. I believe in spiritual things. I'm spiritual. You cloak it until you trust. Trust. It's a building of trust. Like if I say I like crystals is this person going to run? If I say that I believe in them, are they going to run? If I say that I believe in my tarot and I hear a voice in my head are they going to run? That's a huge thing. You know? And then it's like they won't. Okay so then we can say it! We trust them! And we have to build trust with each other."

Belle also indicated during her interview she has used similar tactics when interacting with others. Belle discusses how she may allude to her Witch identity by describing herself as "Witchy" or having a "Witchy aesthetic." She also shares how she has referred to herself as spiritual as opposed to claiming her Witch identity with other people. As she has matured in her path, she shares how she is less likely to do this now:

> I kept on trying to make people feel okay with it. It was the same thing with saying that I was Jewish...oh but I don't practice. Oh I only go to temple for high holidays. Like no fuck that like I am Jewish. Like I want to feel proud about my heritage. I wanted to feel proud about my identity. And I think that's kind of what led to it is like I hated just kind of being like oh I'm Jewish, but not that Jewish. I'm witchy, but don't worry, I'm just kind of witchy and things. No. I'm a fucking Witch. Like mess with me. It's a part of who I am.

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Participants also recognize that the Broom Closet is a place they can always return if they feel it is necessary. Although Saoirse has since exited the closet, she mentions that Paganism is an identity she can hide if she wants to. She says, "I'm very good at it. If I want to keep it under wraps you aren't going to find out about it." Belle also recognizes that religious affiliation is a hidden identity unless otherwise advertised. She recognizes if she ever wants to return to the Broom Closet, it is an option:

I feel like [the Broom Closet] is always there. Like...if I meet somebody new I don't have to tell them right away. It's the same as being Jewish. It's a hidden identity. But very much a part of my identity. so...I could go into it at any point in time.

Belle and Saoirse also discuss how they do not typically share their Pagan identities at their places of employment. Although Belle still wears "witchy" clothing and jewelry to work, she also shares how she does not directly share her Witch identity with coworkers unless they become very close friends and she has determined they are safe to disclose to. Saoirse shares that she never advertises her Pagan identity in a work setting. She believes when in the workplace it is inappropriate for anyone to discuss religious affiliation because of the potential for it to interfere with accomplishing job responsibilities. She explains how she differentiates the workplace as not being an acceptable setting to be out about her identity:

I don't talk about religion and spiritual practices in a professional setting just as a practice because one, it's different and that's not a conversation I want to have in a professional environment. I don't care what job I'm working. Unless someone starts the conversation first I don't broach the topic because everyone has very different perspectives and viewpoints... I also can't let it get in the way of how I do my job and they do theirs.

Non-Pagan Reactions

General Perceptions and Stereotypes

When asked about their experiences with non-Pagan people, all participants shared stories about positive and negative interactions. Participant feedback fell in line with previous research showing that most negative interactions are centered around the general stereotypes that have been shown to be associated with Paganism. These stereotypes primarily include conflating Paganism with Satanism and devil worship (Adler 1986; Brown 2013; Cookson 1997) or viewing Pagans as being delusional or mentally ill in some way (Reece 2016; Tejeda 2015). JE's response is a perfect reflection of this as she says she believes "a lot of people think of witches in one of two ways: a) worshippers of Satan and are inherently evil or b) just an eccentric sort of person, "kooky."

When I asked participants how they thought non-Pagans perceived Paganism, all participants discussed having either been directly called a devil worshiper or feeling that most non-Pagans would equate their practice with some form of devil worship if they were aware that they were Pagan. Other stereotypes that were mentioned included being evil, possessed by demons, and participating in ritual sacrifice. Four of 6 participants also felt as if outsiders may also look at them as being "eccentric", "crazy", or "weird" due to their beliefs or that felt they would not be taken as seriously by non-Pagans due to misunderstandings of their religion. George shares how people at his workplace would voice their dislike of him being Pagan, and that, "most of them would just tell me I was crazy." Jasmine and Belle share their concerns about others taking them less seriously due to their beliefs. When discussing sharing their faith with others Jasmine says, "there's a fear of not being taken seriously." Belle also shares how when she comes out to someone there is "still just this fear of [people] taking me less seriously" and that she sometimes questions if she is "going to disappoint somebody somehow or are they going to think that [she is] strange?"

Xenn and Jasmine both expressed that they felt most of these stereotypes and reactions are primarily based on outsiders not having accurate knowledge of what Paganism is, as Xenn shares:

Oh my God devil worship! It's oh my God devil worship or, okay so you worship trees? They have no idea what Paganism is, what Paganism is about. What are the rules? What are the tenants? What are the dos and don'ts? They have no idea whatsoever.

Jasmine discusses how Witchcraft is becoming more popular and visible to mainstream society. Despite Witchcraft's rising visibility to the public, she feels that many non-Pagans are still not being educated about what Witchcraft and Paganism are. As she describes:

There's a lot of reasons to be afraid right now as a Pagan. and it kind of sucks to say this but being a Witch is super popular right now to the point where no one takes you seriously. Because they're like oh so you do like crystals and like light incense and you're like yeah but that's not it, you know?

All Participants had different ways in which they responded to encountering these stereotypes. Jasmine, who is fully closeted, opts to keep her Pagan identity a secret. Respondents such as Belle are more selective about who they would share their identity with, and only try to have conversations with people if they have already indicated that they would be more open to discussion. JE and Saoirse, who both describe themselves as being out of the Broom Closet, still employ this tactic on occasion. For Saoirse, the negativity of the interaction simply is not worth it. Respondents, such as George and Xenn, have specifically gone out of their way to try and educate others about Paganism whether it be through attempting to have a conversation or sharing Pagan educational content online.

Two participants also discussed how their geographical location possibly impacted their interactions with non-Pagans. 5 out of 6 participants reside in the Southern United States. Belle, however, lived in a different region of the United States prior to relocating to the South. She describes her previous city as being more populated and diverse than the South. During the

interview, she recalls her shock at being openly asked by a coworker, presumably making the assumption that she is Christian, what church she attends:

But then moving to the south I remember one of the first things my coworkers had asked me was, "Oh what church do you guys go to?" and I was like...hold the phone, backup, what?... Because that's just not appropriate. I feel like number 1 for the workplace number 2 like in general…like getting to know somebody it doesn't make sense to me. To ask somebody what church they go to? Because that's not like a conversation starter. That's not a get to know you type of thing, that's like a oh are you planning to come with me? Like...what's going on? Or do you want to invite me to your church and that falls into the are you trying to convert me thing? And that's just not somebody in where I grew up would ..that's not something where I grew up someone would ever ask. And so it like took me aback...but I guess that's normal here.

During his interview, Xenn also discusses how feels that his geographical location has impacted his experiences with non-Pagans. Xenn describes growing up in a town with a small population that was predominantly Christian. He recalls the physical altercations that occurred when he was younger due to his Pagan faith, and says, "I feel like the majority of my fights probably could have been avoided if I was in a different location that was a little more open." As he further explains:

There are about 4,000 people in [town] and about 180 churches in [town]. So there's 180 churches and only about 4000 people, and that's if you include all the cows...so I mean… It was a small place...People would say, "Hey you know what church do you go to?" "Well I don't." "Well, are you some sort of devil worshiper?" "No". "Well, what are you?"

Violent Reactions

Two of the participants, George and Xenn, who are the most open about their Pagan identities, discussed instances that almost or did turn violent. Xenn discussed several instances

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when he was younger that turned into physical altercations. Xenn has often worn clothing and jewelry depicting pentagrams that clearly signal his Pagan identity to others. When he would wear Pagan items in middle and high school, Xenn described himself as being viewed as "public enemy number one" by other classmates and family members who would ask if he was Christian, accuse him of devil worship, and tell him he was going to hell. When recounting these interactions, he says, "They sunk to a level of insulting me and attacking me for something which is mine to choose. And I chose differently than they did, so they chose to attack me." Although he says that physical altercations have lessened as he has grown older, he recounts one story in his adult years that took place when he was wearing a t-shirt depicting the Viking God Odin:

> Some guy had followed me to my karate school and got out of the car and started just throwing Bible verses at me and I was like dude ...go away. Just leave me alone. You don't want any part of this because I will defend myself. And he started calling me a devil worshiper and a Satanist and I was like, you have to believe in Satan to worship Satan and I don't even believe in your god, so why don't you just fuck off of my property before I beat you. And he started swinging.

George discussed how he ran into issues at work with people disliking that he was Pagan but was fortunate enough to be "far enough up the management chain [that] nobody wanted to push [his] buttons too far." George describes one worker that he had hired and initially got along really well with. However, after the worker found out that George had converted to Paganism, that changed. He confronted George about being Pagan which resulted in several "vicious" conversations that involved the worker trying to convince George that he was wrong, being deceived by the devil, and was going to hell. A couple of times those conversations almost turned violent with George explaining that people had to pull them apart to keep them from fighting. In order to make peace with the worker, George invited him to take some of the books that he had used when he was studying to become a preacher. The worker

appreciated it, and George said that as time went on, he became less closed minded and that the two of them are friends today.

Xenn often wears accessories that advertise his Pagan identity and George openly discusses his Pagan identity and even has a Pagan salutation at the end of his work email. When comparing their experiences to other participants, their negative interactions appear to be more severe. It is likely that their openness about their Paganism is what has invited such negative interactions from others. Although other participants are out of the Broom Closet in some ways, they still don't necessarily go out of their way to signal their Pagan identities to others when unsolicited.

Fear and Loss of Social Connections

Four out of 6 of the participants discussed either fearing the loss of or actually losing social connections after disclosing that they are Pagan. Both Xenn and Saoirse specifically shared instances where they did lose family members and friends due to being Pagan. Xenn, sharing his Pagan identity with his cousin, recounts how his cousin immediately accused him of devil worship. Xenn said that he had tried talking to his cousin, telling him that they each had their different beliefs, but they were blood relatives, and it should not be an issue. He said that the cousin would not let it go though and that the incident ended in a physical fight between the two.

Saoirse also shared how people, including one of her cousins, would no longer have anything to do with her after learning that she was Pagan because they were too uncomfortable with it. She goes on to explain how she believes that misunderstandings of Paganism and an individual's personal religious beliefs and experiences cause them to react in a negative way towards Paganism:

> I've known people who once they found out I was Pagan they were done. They weirded out. I had a cousin who stopped talking to me for years. Years she didn't talk to me because I told her I was Pagan. She was just too uncomfortable with it...she didn't

understand it. It comes down to an individual's life experience. What they've been exposed to. What their personal belief system is because there are some people who really do believe that bible verse "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." There are people who really think if you're Pagan that you're a devil worshiper and there's a very clear difference between being Satanic and Luciferian and being Pagan. Those are not the same thing. Completely different ball of wax. So it really comes down to the individual. Their perspectives and their beliefs and their life experiences

In comparison to other participants, Belle is more guarded about sharing her Pagan identity with others. During the interview, Belle describes how she does not usually advertise to others that she is a practicing Witch. She instead may allude to it by describing herself as "witchy" or "having a witchy aesthetic" through the clothing and jewelry that she wears. When asked, Belle said she hasn't had any major negative experiences when she has come out to non-Pagans outside of "maybe older people in my family just kind of rolling their eyes a little bit." She further explains that she worries that if she was more direct about her Witch identity with her family, that they may be disappointed in her or think that she is strange. Since she is not as vocal about her Pagan identity, Belle is uncertain if it has been the cause of losing friends, but she has wondered if this has been the case:

I wonder if any of my old friends have stopped being my friend or we've just fell out of touch because I wonder from their perspective like they no longer wanted to be friends with me because of it, but I just try not to think about them anymore. If they don't wanna be in my life, then why would I care?

Although Jasmine has not shared her Pagan identity to her family, they know that she is not currently attending Church. She explains that in her family's eyes she is "on a break from God" which is hugely stigmatized within her family as they already believe she is going to "burn in hell forever." Jasmine is fully aware of how her family perceives Witchcraft and Paganism as something that is evil and to fear due to their own religious beliefs. Being aware of their views,

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she knows that they would completely reject her if she ever told them she is Pagan. Due to this, Jasmine remains fully closeted to maintain her family relationships. Consider her words:

It's powerful and if that's your fear of constant possession, of constant devil, of constant hell fire, of constant torturous hell and of missing out on an eternity of paradise, you're not gonna wanna forgive anything because you're scared all the time. And that is not a battle I can win in the minds of the people I love. And I know that. I would rather keep them and love them and do what I need to do even with my own fears about that than to try to unmingle decades of fear mongering because they're lost, and sometimes, we just have to [accept] they're lost. Like they're happy they're lost and they're happy and they cannot compromise both. They cannot say, ``I'm a happy Christian, I love God and going to heaven, and I'm also cool with you doing something that I think is going to lead to your evil possession." No matter how many times you wanna quote that movie and say there is no devil in the craft! They're not going to get it and its straight terrible fear.

Jasmine shares how she sometimes struggles with not being able to reveal such an important aspect of her own identity with her loved ones. She describes how the situation with her family is a "hard one" because she feels the need to hide so much of her life experiences from them. Jasmine says, "I wish things were different I think how it impacts me is that there's constantly something that I don't say. And it is harder to be around the people you love. Having to keep her faith a secret not only has a negative impact on her relationships with her family, but it sometimes has a negative impact on her happiness and her ability to practice her faith. As she describes:

And it's sad and I have to fight the fear of the secrets and this double life interfering with my work but I'll get there. I'm still dealing with it…Yeah you have to fight that fear. You have to fight that fear and just know that your ancestors they had to fight that fear too and you call upon them and you call upon their strength and you do your homework and you realize you're not alone and you get smart and you find ways to deal with it and you

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just have to ...you can't let fear dictate your magic and it becomes another obstacle for

you. I'm not gonna lie it's easier to live in the truth. Everywhere. It becomes another

obstacle for you, but you have to constantly it becomes another battle that you have to

fight. You cannot let it control your magic or your happiness.

Normalization of Paganism

Despite participants' sharing stories about having negative interactions with non-Pagan

people, 4 out of 6 participants also expressed how many, if not most, of their interactions were

positive. One participant, JE even said she had never personally experienced a negative

interaction when disclosing she was Pagan. All participants discussed how they believe

Paganism and Witchcraft are on their way to normalization due to a growing acceptance of

diversity in society

Saoirse shared how she believed as the world has become more globalized, younger

generations are becoming more accustomed to encountering diverse groups of people and

cultures either in person or online. She believes experiencing different cultures and beliefs leads

people to focus more on the relationships that are built with the individual instead of any

stereotypes surrounding a person's culture. She explains:

Many younger people get to know a person just based on a person and then their

spiritual life comes second or third. You get to like the person then you go, "oh well that's

what you believe? Well that's pretty cool" because you already have a relationship with a

person. This friend. This is your companion. This is your sweetheart. This is someone

you care about and respect in some form. So what they believe spiritually…does not

bother you.

George also shared how many of his friends knew him prior to becoming Pagan. Since

they already knew him on a personal level, they were more accepting of his conversation to

Paganism. George believes this type of interaction and exposure makes it easier for other

Pagans to find acceptance in society:

Let's say that I'm a diehard Christian and I meet you and you've expressed your Pagan beliefs to me and through getting to know you I see well you're not a bad person. You know, you don't wish me ill, you're not trying to convert my children to being Pagans, you're not trying to burn them, and all this kind of stuff. All the things I've been told all my life, you're nothing like that.

Other participants also believed a growing Pagan presence in society is helping to normalize the religion. Belle and Jasmine both mentioned the impact non closeted Pagans can have on raising awareness around the religion for non-Pagan practitioners. Belle notes this is something that has always made her pause about being closeted about any aspect of her identity. Even though Jasmine is firmly closeted due to her family, she still expressed admiration for those who are paving the way for closeted Pagans. Xenn also brings to the discussion the importance and need of having realistic Pagan representation in modern pop culture, which he says is something that does not currently exist.

Although Paganism and Witchcraft seem to be growing more popular in America, two participants still worry about misinformation being spread, but from other Pagans. Both Xenn and Jasmine expressed concern about other Pagans sharing information online that does not accurately represent Paganism. They both differentiate an authentic Paganism from one that is not as knowledgeable and one that is adopted more as an aesthetic. Xenn discusses knowing several people who he says claim to be Pagan, but never further their knowledge of or actually practice the religion. He believes the lack of knowledge and understanding is damaging in its misrepresentation of Paganism. Jasmine also worries about the misrepresentation of Paganism she sees on social media platforms such as TikTok. She shares how she has seen what she does "reduced to a twelve second TikTok…in the name of witchiness." She describes how they may be using elements of her practice, but they don't understand the meaning behind what they are doing:

I have seen being a Witch being talked about in a way that is sometimes damaging because it has become an aesthetic… So there's a brand of Paganism that has become mainstream culture and there is a very authentic rich Paganism that has become technological. So where I found real authentic people doing work or doing it the most on the internet, but mainstream I have seen ..rose petals and bath salts become the definition of it and then people use that and say that's what you do? And I'm like well yeah, but like no. okay I use that, but that's not what it is and them be like you're dumb. Because it's like people Google and it's like okay well it's like well wishes on a crystal right?... And it is damaging because that's what you think it is. Because and then when you tell people what it actually is they don't like that or they don't wanna hear it.

Despite her worries about her path not being accurately represented, Jasmine still hopes that the attention it is receiving now will open the door for a more authentic Paganism to become more mainstream.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

At the start of my thesis, I was interested in exploring three primary research questions including: What factors influence a person's decision to either disclose or hide his or her Pagan identity from others? What are the resulting outcomes of either decision and how do those outcomes impact their lives and overall emotional well-being? What do Pagans experience when they step out of the Broom Closet? The data collected allows me to answer what factors influence a person's decisions to either disclose or hide their Pagan identity and what the outcome of those decisions are. Throughout the course of the interviews, I was unable to collect data that fully addresses how these experiences impact participant lives and their overall emotional well-being. I was also unable to capture the experience of stepping out of the Broom Closet in a meaningful way. While I was unable to address all my research questions, there were other themes that emerged when speaking with participants. These included their experiences becoming Pagan and why they decided to leave mainstream religion behind.

Becoming Pagan

All participants were initially asked to describe how they first came to Paganism. Their responses reflect Adler's (1986) description of how people often come to Paganism. Three main themes emerged including spiritual experiences at a young age, a sense of coming home when they discovered Paganism, and dissatisfaction with mainstream religions.

Adler (1986) describes Paganism as a religion that often confirms pre-existing beliefs that practitioners have held prior to coming to the faith (Adler 1986:13-19). I too found this phenomenon among participants who describe having spiritual experiences at a young age coupled with their dissatisfaction with mainstream religion. Participants describe being exposed at a young age to spiritual or otherworldly forces. These experiences led participants to their own searches seeking answers that eventually led them to Paganism. Here, amidst these

ancient beliefs and practices, they found both explanations and affirmations for their spiritual encounters.

Adler (1986) also shares how people often describe their experience of becoming Pagan as a sense of "coming home (Adler 1986:13)." Saoirse specifically invokes this feeling by using the words "it initially felt a lot like coming home and it was a good feeling" when she is sharing her coming to Paganism story. Other participants discussed similar narratives by describing Paganism as something that simply makes sense to them. As George describes, Paganism allows him to believe in something that "makes sense" to him. Jasmine also shares that after discovering Witchcraft, her experiences with Spirit and her connection to the moon "makes a lot of sense now." Xenn describes himself as having "always been Pagan" he just "didn't have the words for it" until he was older and began studying Pagan religions. Belle's discovery of Paganism led her to a deeper understanding of her connection to Witchcraft as a child and for JE it explained why she was drawn to stories of the ancient Egyptian pantheon as a child.

Contemporary Paganism grew in popularity alongside the liberal and feminist movements in the 1960s. Paganism has often been described as a more worthy spiritual alternative to mainstream faiths due to its inclusion of alternative gender and sexual orientations, female empowerment, and lack of dogmatic practices (Adler 1986:406-407; Magliocco 2004:71; Wilson 2005:81-83). As I noted above, a primary factor for participants' conversion to Paganism was their dissatisfaction with mainstream religions. Participants found that their personal values supporting diversity and gender equality leaves them unable to follow a religion that does not support these heartfelt views. Participants identified mainstream religions, primarily Christianity, as a form of social control. George and Jasmine share their views that Christianity specifically supports the oppression of women and minority groups such as people of color and the LGBTQ+ communities. Paganism offers them a spiritual avenue that supports their views of inclusivity and equality. Xenn also raises concerns about how mainstream religions are often used as a tool to keep society reliant on consumerism as a

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means of survival as opposed to creating more self-sufficient communities. Previous literature has indicated that many who are drawn to Paganism are dissatisfied with dominant American consumerism culture. Paganism presents an alternative culture that shifts away from consumerism and focuses on sustainability for both one's self and the environment (Magliocco 2004:64; Sprouse 2014:11).

Participants raised in Christian households, such as Saoirse, George, and Jasmine, describe how they initially sought to better understand Christian theology and to reconcile Christianity with their personal beliefs. Tactics included questioning religious leaders or conducting their own research using Christian texts, but neither avenue offered them acceptable answers. The outcomes they describe include religious leader's inability to answer theological questions, telling them that they just needed to "take it on faith" as described by Saoirse, and not being able to make sense of the information they did obtain. For these participants, the unwillingness or inability of mainstream religious leaders to adequately answer their pressing questions was a key factor in their decisions to abandon Christianity and embrace Paganism, a superior religious alternative able to answer their spiritual questions.

In and Out of the Broom Closet

When looking at what factors that influence a Pagan's decision to either disclose or hide their identity to others, three primary themes emerged. Participants who discussed having accepting family or friend social supports and gaining a sense of self-acceptance were more likely to disclose their Pagan identity to others. Participants also use certain tactics to determine if someone is a safe person to disclose their Pagan identity to.

All participants who are out of the Broom Closet discussed having positive social supports from either friend or family groups. Previous research suggests that people with concealable stigmatized identities who are accepted by their family possess greater feelings of self-acceptance (Shilo & Savaya 2011:326). This likely explains why participants in this study

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whose religious preferences were fully accepted and supported by their immediate family at a younger age have never felt the need to hide their religious identity outside of the family.

Literature focusing on identity disclosure amongst LGBTQ+ populations have noted the importance of feeling accepted by family and friend social groups in relation to the decision to disclose identity (Barringer, Sumerau, Gay 2017:321). While research indicates that family acceptance impacts overall feelings of self-acceptance, having friend support has been linked to higher rates of disclosure. It has been found that oftentimes LGBTQ+ populations will come out to their friend supports prior to coming out to their families (Shilo & Savaya 2011:326).

In a similar fashion, participants who grew up in religious households first discussed having friend support prior to coming out to their family. Accepting friend support networks likely provided them with the confidence to disclose their religious identity to family members. George, although raised by a religious family, has never felt the need to hide his Pagan identity from family. Coming to Paganism at a later age in life possibly explains why this participant does not feel it necessary to hide his identity from his religious parents, but this is overall unclear. Jasmine, on the other hand, having less social support to draw upon has never disclosed her Pagan identity to her religious family. She remains closeted with non-Pagans.

Achieving a sense of self-acceptance is also a contributing factor that allowed participants to feel comfortable with disclosing their identity to non-Pagans. As participants Saoirse and JE furthered their knowledge and experience in Paganism they described growing more confident about speaking to others about it. This confidence allowed some of the participants to achieve self-acceptance. Belle described being able to achieve self-acceptance after witnessing other Pagans being open about their religious identities with others. Seeing other Pagans being open about their faith helped normalize her own identity for themselves.

Participants also discuss how they sometimes use key phrases most other Pagans or people familiar with Paganism would understand. These phrases are purposively used to test someone's receptiveness towards being Pagan independent of whatever mainstream religious

belief and thought they may ascribe to. Jasmine aptly describes this process as "the secret ways you uncover people." Belle shared how she uses phrases include talking about her religious affiliation as being "more spiritual than religious" or describing herself as being "Witchy" or having a "Witchy aesthetic." Jasmine adds that she has discussed elements that are prevalent in Paganism such as being interested in crystals, candles, or having an affinity for the moon. If people have negative reactions to these lesser phrases, Belle and Jasmine feel that offering more information about their Pagan identity or beliefs would likely not be well received, and therefore make the decision to keep their identity secret from the individual.

It was also found that participants sometimes wear jewelry or accessories that would openly signal their Pagan identity to others. Those who are more out of the Broom Closet than other participants seem more likely to wear Pagan accessories in public, such as religious shirts and symbolic jewelry. Although this advertises Pagan identity, it is unclear how outsiders interpret these accessories. As Belle explains, she often wears jewelry indicating she is a Witch, but is uncertain if people that notice the jewelry actually understand its symbolic meaning or relation to Paganism.

Overall, participants responding to life with a stigmatized identity were similar to Link's Modified Labeling Theory. All participants express that they are aware of the negative stereotypes associated with their religion whether they have experienced negative interactions with others or not. Consistent with existing literature around stigma, participants have been socialized to be aware of how society views and tends to treat discredited others (Goffman 1963:7; Link et al 1989:402-403). In Modified Labeling Theory Link et al (1989) outlines three primary responses to stigma, including secrecy, withdrawal, and education (Link et al 1989:403). All three of these stigma responses were evident across participants. At times, participants will deploy more than one strategy to protect themselves. Participants often adopt a secretive approach and stay in the Broom Closet. Being in the Broom Closet allows people to protect themselves from the fear of rejection by family and friend groups.

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Instances of withdrawal are also evident amongst participants. To avoid negative interactions with others, participants in this study made an effort to surround themselves with diverse and accepting friend groups they know would be supportive of their religious beliefs. If people are identified to be unaccepting, many participants make the decision to cut those people from their lives in efforts to escape censoring behavior. Previous research found Pagans who have access to more resources will make life decisions to lessen their exposure to discrimination, including relocating to more accepting social environments. For those with fewer socioeconomic resources this would be a less realistic option (Wilson 2005:51-60).

Another response similar to Link's Modified Labeling Theory is seen in respondents' attempts to educate non-Pagans towards their religion. Previous literature documents that when Pagans become more experienced in their religion, they sometimes feel it necessary to take on activist roles to raise awareness and education around Paganism (Reece 2016:89). Xenn and George are the only participants in this study to discuss being involved in forms of faith-based activism. Saoirse, Belle and JE, however, discussed how increased knowledge of their religion provided them the confidence to step out of the Broom Closet and engage in discourse with others about their religion. Belle describes occasionally stepping out of the Broom Closet to educate others about her faith. She undertakes this risk to help normalize Paganism.

Participants describe processes of disclosure varying across social contexts illustrating how the Broom Closet can be understood as a fluid place, one that participants can step in and out of as needed. Xenn and George who never entered the Broom Closet express having the confidence to engage with others and defend themselves if necessary. This mirrors Goffman's description of meeting the other with "hostile bravado," which may result in negative outcomes (Goffman 1963:17). Xenn's story illustrates Goffman's idea. As a younger person he often came to violent interactions with non-accepting others when he was open about his Pagan faith. Although he reports having less violent interactions as he has grown older, it is uncertain if this is because he has since relocated to a more accepting location or because he has adapted to

managing interactions to lead to less negative incomes. It is also unclear the extent to which gender may impact disclosure of Pagan identities, as both participants who were the most vocal about their religion are male.

Non-Pagan Reactions

Participants described varying outcomes to their decisions to either hide or disclose their identity. Due to the existing stereotypes and misunderstandings of Paganism, Pagans who were out of the Broom Closet described experiences of negative interactions with others, violent interactions, and loss of family or friends. Participants who sometimes hide their Pagan identities discussed the fear of experiencing negative interactions and the potential loss of family or friend connections. Participant responses were not all negative, however. Many described positive experiences with others and shared how they felt that Paganism is becoming more normalized and accepted by mainstream society. What is less clear from participant responses is how these outcomes ultimately impacted participants' lives and their overall emotional wellbeing.

When discussing non-Pagan views towards Paganism, participant responses highlight how Paganism is still an often-misunderstood religion. Participants echo many of the general stereotypes associated with Paganism, including it being conflated with Satanism and devil worship, and being an evil or immoral religion (Hoadley 2016). Participants also note that non-Pagans view them as eccentric or strange due to their beliefs. Participants attribute the persisting stereotypes around Paganism to a lack of outsider knowledge around the religion coupled with perceived religious intolerance from Christian religions.

A quantitative analysis conducted by Gwendolyn Reece (2016) exploring Pagan experiences of stigma found that Pagans who are out of the Broom Closet tend to encounter more negative reactions from others compared to those who hide their identities (Reece 2016:89). Participants in this study share similar experiences. Those who describe being most

visible to outsiders as Pagan, whether it be through verbal communication or wearing Pagan accessories, reported more severe reactions from non-Pagans in comparison to those who are more guarded about their identity. The most extreme of these reactions include encounters that almost or did end in physical violence. The violent encounters occurred among those participants who have never been in the Broom Closet and often advertise their faith to others.

Participants in this study who were out of the Broom Closet share instances of having lost friends and family members over their religious beliefs. This was due to the misconception that Paganism is an evil religion associated with devil worship. Other consequences of sharing Pagan identity for participants are similar to existing research indicating that Pagans fear false accusations of wrongdoing based on the stereotypes of their faith and losing important social connections (Reece 2016:76). Participants who are in the Broom Closet report that they fear losing or damaging friend or family relationships because they would either be perceived as evil or strange. Jasmine shares how she feels the act of hiding her religious identity is detrimental to her family relationships. Her family cannot really know who she is as a person because she is unable to share such an integral part of her self-identity and life experience with them.

Two participants also provided insight on how geo-cultural location likely has an impact on their experiences with non-Pagans. Participants primarily reside in North Carolina. The Southern and South-Central United States are commonly referred to as the Bible Belt (Thomas-Durrell 2020). The Bible Belt region of the United States has a unique culture centered around Christianity and church involvement. The high level of religiosity also results in higher levels of conservative attitudes amongst residents (Sahl & Batson 2011; Thomas-Durrell 2020). Living in a location that culturally focuses on Christianity and church involvement likely changes the Pagan experience with non-Pagans. As Belle recalls moving to the South, she remembers how "taken aback" she was at her coworker's assumption that she went to Church without knowing her well. As she explains, "that's not something where I grew up someone would ever ask. And so it like took me aback...but I guess that's normal here." Xenn also shares how he felt that

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growing up in a small primarily Christian town led to more negative interactions with non-Pagans. Describing many instances where he had been attacked for his religion when he was younger, he says, "I feel like the majority of my fights probably could have been avoided if I was in a different location that was a little more open."

Although Christianity has been the predominant religion and societal norm in the United States, its numbers have seen a marked decline across a wide range of different demographic groups. The number of U.S adults who do not identify with any organized religion, or describe themselves as Atheist or Agnostic, has increased (Pew Research Center 2015). In the recent past, America has seen an increase in cultural and religious diversity in society. There is some evidence this shift has led to greater inclusivity and religious tolerance in American society (Dupper, Forrest-Bank, and Lowry-Carusillo 2015:37). These changing trends may explain why participant responses indicate that Paganism is becoming more normalized and receiving at least a lukewarm acceptance by mainstream society. Participants offer several reasons that they believe Paganism is on its way to becoming more normalized. Saoirse cites globalization and younger generations experiencing more diverse cultures causing them to be more likely to accept Paganism as a legitimate practice.

Other participants focus on the increasing number of Pagans in America that are coming out of the Broom Closet and raising awareness and education about their religion. Participants also identify the Broom Closet as a function of normalization when Pagans make the decision to step out of it and publicly claim their religious identity. Belle specifically challenges the extent to which Pagans exist within the Broom Closet, questioning whether Pagans are more prone to not advertising their religious identities instead of actively trying to hide them.

Participants recognize that the normalization of Paganism is obviously a positive outcome of a growing Pagan presence in society, and yet, they still held some reservations. Jasmine and Xenn both express concern that due to the increasing popularity of Witchcraft and Paganism; some newer Pagans may not yet have a full understanding of Pagan practices and

beliefs. They worry this lack of knowledge or understanding may lead to non-Pagans misunderstanding and misrepresenting the true foundations of Paganism. Given the misinformation campaigns against Paganism in the past (Adler 1986:135-137; Cookson 1997:725-731), it is unsurprising that Pagans would be skeptical of other Pagans also potentially causing damage to the reputation of their religion.

Although I feel that I am unable to meaningfully address the overall impact of participants' decisions to share or hide their Pagan identity, and how the Broom Closet impacted their overall emotional well-being, there are some insights that emerged from the data.

During Jasmine's interview, she shares how the inability to tell her family about her religious identity does have a negative impact on her life. Having to hide her faith and such an important aspect of her life causes her to not feel as if she can have a full relationship with her family. She describes how it makes it difficult to even be around her loved ones. Living with the fear of being discovered, and having to keep her identity secret, causes her to struggle with her overall happiness. Additionally, the fear that she experiences sometimes has a negative impact on her ability to practice Witchcraft.

Limitations and Future Research

The small non-random sample of participants in this study limits generalizing beyond my data. I cannot claim to speak to all Pagan experiences within the Broom Closet. Due to the limited data that was collected, I was also unable to truly speak to all of my initial research questions, including, how do outcomes of disclosing or hiding Pagan identity impact Pagan lives and overall emotional well-being? And what do Pagans experience when they step out of the Broom Closet? The answers to these questions remain elusive and invite further study in future research.

As anticipated, I was also not able to find as many participants who identified as being fully closeted about their Pagan identity. My personal association with Paganism, however,

allowed me to be able to connect with at least one fully closeted participant who was willing to speak with me. Many experiences within the Broom Closet were explored through participants' past experiences of hiding identity prior to coming out. Future studies should consider, if possible, the inclusion of currently closeted participants to better capture an understanding of how Pagans navigate the Broom Closet in present day settings.

Another initial concern was having participants openly speak about the sensitive topics included in this study concerning religious discrimination and possessing a stigmatized identity. While all participants seemed fully open to sharing their experiences with me, it is always possible that they did not fully disclose their thoughts and feelings towards some of the topics presented in the interview questions. Perhaps some answered based on what they think I wanted to hear in order to be "helpful" respondents to my research topic. These limitations, of course, are common in this genre of research.

Participants' demographic information including education and income levels were not collected in this study. Thus, I am unable to connect participant experiences with their socio-economic statuses. The sample size was also predominantly White, including only one participant who identified as a Person of Color. Future studies would benefit from including a more diverse sample of participants to consider how intersections of stigmatized identity impact the Pagan experience of the Broom Closet and rates of disclosure. Future research should likely consider the effect of gender among rates of disclosure among Pagans. The two males in this study indicated that they had never been in the Broom Closet. Perhaps men are more likely to disclose their stigmatized identity than women. Future studies should also further explore how geo-cultural context impacts the Pagan social experience and rates of disclosure.

By way of closing, my initial study invites additional inquiry.

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