ON BECOMING A WITCH: LEARNING IN A MARGINALIZED COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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Much learning in adulthood is informal, social in nature, and firmly embedded in the life context of the learner. It takes place in social groups engaged in a common practice. One model for considering the learning that takes place in social groups is Wenger's notion of communities of practice. In a community of practice, learning, practice, and identity development are intertwined. The purpose of this study was to investigate learning in a marginalized community of practice—that of witches. Twenty witches belonging to several different covens, or communities of practice, were interviewed. Data analysis revealed (a) a trajectory of participation representing movement from the periphery to the center of the group; (b) learning in practice that is experiential, that combines formal and intuitive knowledge, and that is spread across the group; and (c) an identifiable process of identity development in becoming a witch. To some extent, the marginality of the community shaped the group's learning and practice.

Keywords: *communities of practice; legitimate peripheral participation; social learning theory; adult learning and development; learning and identity; Wiccan*

Much learning in adulthood is informal, social in nature, and firmly embedded in the life context of the learner. The events of everyday life present opportunities for learning, as do the activities inherent in being members of social groups emanating

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from family, work, social, civic, and professional organizations. Learning that takes place in social groups is a defining characteristic of a social learning theory known as communities of practice. First presented by Lave and Wenger (1991) and further developed by Wenger (1998), a community of practice is a group of people who engage in a shared activity; the community is ever evolving as newcomers learn the beliefs, values, and practices of the group. In a community of practice, "Learning is the engine of practice, and practice is the history of that learning" (p. 96).

Because learning is central to a community of practice, studying such communities can afford us insights into the socially embedded nature of learning—insights that, in turn, can be systematically utilized to enhance adult learning in various social contexts, including formal education settings. However, much of what we know about this learning is from business and industry, in which communities of practice have been organized specifically to promote organizational restructuring and shifting to a knowledge-based economy (Galagan, 1993). Communities of practice that develop spontaneously and informally, such as civic and professional groups, might be considered more authentic sites for studying this phenomenon. By extension, a marginalized community that practices in relative isolation might be an even better laboratory for understanding participation and learning in a community of practice.

It is not at all clear how someone joins, learns, or practices in a marginalized community labeled extreme, deviant, or suspect. How does one learn to be part of a militia group or the Communist party, or Wiccan, for example? We know that these groups exist; that new members have had to learn the norms, values, attitudes, and behaviors appropriate to the group; and that these groups engage in practice. But sometimes there are no formally sanctioned classes or publicly available materials. How do adults who wish to be a member of one of these unconventional groups learn what they need to know and come to practice as a member of the group? Do these marginalized communities function in the same way as mainstream communities, especially with regard to how learning occurs? If membership in a marginalized community is kept secret, how are changes in one's identity (as a result of being in the group) expressed outside the community of practice?

To address these questions, this study examined how a marginalized community of practice, that of witches, functions in terms of participation, learning, and identity, which are key components in social learning theory. We chose to study Wiccans because of their status in our society as marginalized. We wondered how individuals find a community, how they move from newcomer status to full membership, how learning occurs in the community, and how their participation affects their identity.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of practice are groups of people who come together informally to share expertise, learn, and practice. Wenger (1998) warned that such groups cannot

be mandated; rather, they coalesce around "the social energy of their learning. Thus, unlike more formal types of organizational structures, it is not so clear where they begin and end. They do not have launching and dismissal dates" (p. 96).

The defining characteristics of communities of practice are mutual engagement of the members around the joint enterprise encompassing a shared repertoire of communal resources that includes "routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice" (Wenger, 1998, p. 83). The community is defined by its practice in which explicit and implicit knowledge are negotiated, that is, meaning is constructed through what the community actually does. This practice is itself a learning process.

Learning is a meaning-making activity inherent in the activity of the community: "The curriculum is the community of practice itself" (Wenger, 1998, p. 100). In addition to the learning being the negotiation of meaning in the group practice, "There is a profound connection between identity and practice" (p. 149) in that "building an identity consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities" (p. 145). Identity is a temporal thing, "not an object, but a constant becoming. . . . Our identity is something we constantly renegotiate during the course of our lives" (p. 153).

Although little is written in the literature about how individuals find their way to particular communities of practice, once encountered, the concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) explains how novices become full community members. In expanding the concept of apprenticeship from the individual master-novice dyad, LPP is the process by which newcomers become full members of a community of practice. LPP is a process of changing participation and changing identity. By legitimately being included in the group even though it is at first on the periphery, through participation, learners move toward the center; however, there is no literal core or center as the group is fluid and ever changing. Thus, this movement from the periphery to the center means becoming progressively more engaged and active in the practice of the community. Wenger and Snyder (2000) commented that the community "typically has a core of participants whose passion for the topic energizes the community and who provide intellectual and social leadership" (p. 3). Note that the core is defined by participation and commitment, rather than expertise and mastery, although those are components of the core. Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that "mastery resides not in the master but in the organization of the community of practice of which the master is a part" (p. 95). LLP is the process by which newcomers become old-timers.

A few resources were located that were deemed particularly relevant to this study of a marginalized community of practice. One is Lagache's (1993) study of a

diving community. Although not a marginalized group, divers constitute a nonformal group that coalesces around the practice of scuba diving. This community of practice has its own curriculum and patterns of participation from casual sightseer to specialty diver to old-timer. Lagache pointed out that some diving knowledge must be learned in context:

> No matter how well a diving textbook is written, it will not contain the appropriate manner to answer the question: "how was the dive?", nor can it, because the answer is different depending on whether the question is asked in Monterey California, Jupiter Florida, or Cannes France. In a word it is context, and it is the limit beyond which institutionalized education cannot function efficiently. (p. 19)

The learning in a community of practice, that of a nonprofit conservation corporation, was the focus of a study by Eisenhart (1994). She tracked the learning trajectory of five recently hired scientists into the community of practice and found that learning coalesced around a particular image of mature scientists as those who were socially responsible. Old-timers created opportunities for newcomers to learn and display their emerging identities as mature scientists.

From another perspective, Billett (1998) raised the question of the relationship between learning and cognitive development through communities of practice. He proposed that the amount and nature of cognitive change will be a function of the following: the extent to which participation is nonroutine, the individual's prior knowledge base, one's access to and standing in the community of practice, the duration of one's participation, and how much guidance one has in the goal-directed activities of the community.

Finally, Heaney (1995) discussed communities of practice and their relevance to adult education. He pointed out that learning defined as "an individual's ongoing negotiation with communities of practice which ultimately gives definition to both self and that practice" explains adult learning in a variety of social groups and settings (p. 2). Furthermore, the notion of LPP can act as a metaphor for how learning can be empowering—"the dynamic and at times chaotic energy which is experienced 'on the edge,'—where the frenzy of transformative learning is more likely to occur" (p. 3). It can also be "disempowering, decentering, and dehumanizing" in the conflict across borders and within communities "as various constituencies compete on an unequal field of power" (p. 3). Attending to the borders thus makes visible not only the learning that takes place, but also some of the ethical-normative issues implicit in adult education practice.

The purpose of this study was to examine a marginalized group of adult learners from the theoretical perspective of social learning theory and communities of practice in particular.

METHOD

A qualitative design was chosen because qualitative research is concerned with process, and understanding the process is more important than looking for an outcome (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1998). In addition, qualitative research is flexible (Patton, 1990). The research process continually evolves and unfolds. Because we sought to understand a dynamic, continuously evolving process, this paradigm was desirable.

A nonrandom, purposeful sample of Wiccans was selected to be interviewed. Wiccans were chosen because we wanted to investigate the learning process in a voluntary, marginalized social group. Although Wicca is a legally recognized religion and "appears to be the fastest-growing religion in America" (Allen, 2001, p. 1), its members remain reluctant to disclose their beliefs for fear of harassment and/or discrimination. Warwick (1995) underpinned the stigmatization faced by Wicca groups when she described how family members' disapproval forces the Wiccan relative to keep her identity secret or to disclose it and face difficult consequences. Some members of Wicca report loss of jobs and custody battles over "the confusion about whether Wicca is a form of Satanism" (p. 131). Stories in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Blumner, 2000) and the *Columbus Dispatch* (Blundo, 2001) recount recent acts of harassment aimed at individuals associated with Wicca. In the first story, a teenage public school student was branded a witch because, among other actions, she read a book on Wicca and dyed her hair black. She was suspended for 15 days, a punishment later reversed with the help of an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit. The second story describes how Wiccans in Dayton, Ohio, protested and successfully overturned the denial of a business permit to an individual who wanted to establish a business that offered "jewelry, incense, gemstones, crystals, books and tarot card readings" (p. 1).

To locate participants, a preliminary investigation of Web sites for witches or Wiccans was conducted. The search yielded e-mail addresses for several contacts and Wiccan listservs. An e-mail message explaining the purpose of the research and soliciting volunteers for interviews was distributed. We identified ourselves as adult educators interested in understanding the learning and group process aspects of becoming members of a Wiccan group. Volunteer participants were sought from covens located within a 90-mile radius of a large metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. In one case, the high priest of a coven solicited other members for interviews. Participants were paid $25 that was often donated to coven projects.

The final sample consisted of 20 White adults, 8 men and 12 women ranging in age from 26 to 59. One person was in his 20s, 10 were in their 30s, 5 were 40 to 49, and 4 were 50 to 59. The length of time the person considered himself or herself a Wiccan ranged from 2 to 25 years. The time as a member of their current coven ranged from 1 to 21 years. Two people indicated that although they were currently solitary practitioners, they had belonged to a group at one time. Level of education spanned from high school graduate to doctorate. Nineteen of the 20 participants

attended college or beyond. Occupations included teacher, attorney, computer consultant, journalist, counselor, manager, carpenter, and homemaker (see Table 1). Our White, well-educated, and largely professional sample is reflective of Wiccan membership generally (Berger, 1999).

A semistructured interview format was used. Areas explored included how the person became a Wiccan and the learning that occurred during the process of becoming Wiccan.

Data were analyzed inductively using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As the interviews were conducted and transcribed, each member of the team read, reread, and coded the transcripts for key points and themes related to participation, identity development, and the learning process. The research team met on numerous occasions to discuss their respective analyses. By constantly moving between the data and the interpretations within the same transcript and across different transcripts, themes emerged. Related themes were organized into categories that addressed our questions about participation, learning, and identity development in this marginalized community of practice.

FINDINGS

Data analysis was informed by this study's theoretical perspective of communities of practice, yielding findings around the three major themes of (a) the trajectory of participation, (b) learning in practice, and (c) identity development.

The Trajectory of Participation

Joining any marginalized group first requires awareness that such a group exists and then knowledge of how to obtain entry. All our participants reported some dissatisfaction with mainstream religious groups and were looking for a spiritual home. Raven, for example, felt she was "always, always searching for something. I was always looking for something that applied meaning to my life." Some adopted an Eastern philosophy or religion for a period of time. All eventually encountered Wicca.

Unlike more traditional religions, Wicca does not recruit new members, there is no national office or bureaucratic structure beyond the local coven, and groups rarely (if ever) publicize their activities. In addition, due to negative stereotypes and myths associated with being a witch, individual members of the Wiccan religion are very selective in revealing their beliefs to others. Thus, encountering the Wiccan religion and finding others to learn from and a group to practice with happens by chance. Or, as several participants expressed it, one has to "find" the path to Wicca. Lady Kyairthwen, for example, "wandered into [a] bookstore . . . and I found staring me straight in the face a book called *The Witches Way*. . . . Well, I picked up the book and I brought it home." She found other Wiccans through a Bulletin Board Service

TABLE 1
Wiccan Demographics

Name	*Age*	*Occupation*	*Education*	*Gender*	*Time Wiccan (years)*
Ariell	39	Store owner	Graduate school	Female	10
Arwen	39	Computer consultant	Some college	Female	21
Arora Twilight	46	Web manager/designer	Some college	Female	13
Cerulia	37	Journalist	BA	Female	4
Choice	41	Attorney	JD	Male	3
Daryl	39	Carpenter	Some college	Male	25
Lord Hermes	41	Superintendent/Water control facility	MBA	Male	6
Lady Kyairthwen	36	Full-time priestess	Some college	Female	14
Kyle	26	Supervisor	BA	Male	8
Lady Devayana	52	Teacher	Doctoral work	Female	13
Lady Ramona	49	Tech support	BA	Female	19
Little Bear	56	Educator	EdD	Male	10
Maira Luna	30	Printing industry	MA	Female	6
Minerva	45	Administrative assistant	Some college	Female	7
Moonshadow	39	Service representative	Associate	Female	7
Nunnely Ar'mu	50	Teacher	EdS	Female	2
Raphael	33	Mental health worker	EdS	Male	4
Raven	33	Legal assistant	Some College	Female	6
Sam	39	Attorney	JD	Male	24
Lord Ziggy	59	Manager	High school	Male	26

(BBS) on the Internet; eventually, a friend of a friend introduced her to a group. Friends or acquaintances introduced several others, two saw an article in a local newspaper about "Witches in the Neighborhood," and three saw an ad in an alternative newspaper to which they sent letters of inquiry to a post office box number. Moonshadow experienced a somewhat unique encounter when attending the monthly meeting of her writer's group:

> For Halloween they had a speaker who was a real witch (in quotation marks), and so I went, and yeah, right, this ought to be hokey [laughter]. And that was Lord Merlin who is a former high priest of [name of church]. And so this real witch . . . went through and dispelled a lot of the Hollywood type stuff and he was talking about basically the principles of magic, [about] working with nature instead of against it. . . . Basically, he outlined my beliefs.

Moonshadow asked him how she could contact a group. His cryptic answer was, "Seek the Lady of [name of church]." She eventually saw an ad in a counter culture resource and contacted the church.

On the periphery. For most participants, contact with a group was followed by a person of authority (the high priest or priestess) determining whether the inquirer was serious enough to be admitted. One church with a seminary held open houses where basic ideas were explained and those attending could sign their name to a list if they were interested in learning more. During the open house, however, the elders informally screened attendees and, according to Moonshadow, "depending on the feeling that you get from somebody," he or she may or may not be invited back.

Irrespective of one's knowledge of Wicca prior to entering a community, the rituals and practices of each group vary with the tradition of the particular group; thus, it takes new participants a while before they can become fully engaged. Arwen noted that "every tradition has things that are specific to the tradition." She went on to say that "one of the things that is specific to our coven in order to move from first to second [degree status] I had to write a timeline history paper" based on Celtic thought. The practice of certain rituals may also differ, such as doing an "open circle." Arwen explained that "I do my circle differently. . . . It's basically changing words and changing when I do things. And it's nothing more than that. It's the form and the way we say it that's important in my tradition." Little Bear, who belongs to an "eclectic, Celtic, shamanistic coven," explained how everyone is a newcomer at first: "Each coven has its own tradition and for example, if I were to move and I were to affiliate with a new group, there would be a learning process involved in understanding how does this group approach craft."

Moving to center. The movement from the periphery to more active participation and responsibilities is more formalized in some groups than others. In the church to which a number of participants in our study belonged, initial training was a year and a day. Arora Twilight explained,

> It's set up in a tiered system where you have a neophyte group of people who are studying, you have folks who have made their decision to take the first steps and become initiates, and then they've got this period of time where they are learning and honing their skills. . . . And they take their next step which is to become a first degree. They become teachers [of the initial classes].

Newcomers become initiated only when they and their elders feel they are ready. Nunnely Ar'mu commented on this assessment process:

> You think you are not being tested but you know you are coming to all these groups and you're talking to all these folks and they decide after a while. You have many little verbal essay questions that are directed to you in different ways and it gets done and [they] pretty much know you are ready or you're not ready.

Once initiated, a member is officially a priest or priestess. In this particular church, more study can result in one being promoted to the second degree level where, according to Kyle, "You actually become ordained. So you can perform marriages

and funeral rites and that kind of thing." A third level is very selective; these are the elders of the church or coven. Ariell, who has formed her own coven, talked about her learning now as being "with the elders in the community . . . handpicked for people that I have a high respect for." She explained that these elders' "job is to train the next group of elders. So they're not teaching the new ones coming in. They're looking at the teachers, not the students. They are for the teachers."

All our participants spoke of mentors or special role models who assisted them in moving from the periphery. Raphael recounted a time when he was working with Lady Ramona, cleaning out the garage at the church. Pointing to a particular piece, she said, " 'You know what this is used for, don't you?' I said 'No,' and I sat there and listened and she taught me how to make incense with a few quick words." Lady Kyairthwen experienced some of the most intense mentoring as she actually lived with her mentor for several months:

> So I would get up in the morning and we'd sit down and we would talk. And I had the chance to ask someone who had 15 years of experience the questions that I wanted to ask. I had this every day of the week. I had going outside with her and getting my hands in the dirt and looking at these herbs and really starting to understand them. Then I had formal class with her Sunday afternoons. . . . I dedicated myself [to her].

Learning in Practice

Although most of our participants spoke of reading extensively and learning on their own in search of a meaningful spiritual home, once they finally encountered Wicca their learning became much more embedded in the practice of Wicca.

Hands-on learning. Our participants commented throughout the interviews that the real learning of Wicca, where it all came together, was in the hands-on experiential activities—the practice itself. Observation, learning through doing, experimentation, and making mistakes were mentioned by participants as critical in becoming a witch. Minerva compared learning about Wicca to learning how to be a mother:

> The actual learning is in the doing and the experiencing as it is with being a mother and raising children. You can have a child in diapers and feed them and play with them and everything but in actual rearing of the child and the experiencing of being in their life . . . that's part of the learning process. It's no different than in this situation. It's the actual experiencing itself.

Raven underscored the importance of actual experience in really understanding the rituals of Wicca:

> Well, it's one thing to read about something. It's another thing to experience it firsthand. It's the difference between a word experience and a world experience; you being in circle and observing the way it works as a whole. It's like the group functions as a

> whole and you can feel the energy and you feel it and you can see it and that's something you can't get out of the book.

Observation and the freedom to make mistakes are also part of the learning process. Maira Luna recounted how she learned about doing a ritual in class and how it translated to the actual setting:

> You come and you watch. Ok, this is how we do the chant. This is how we stand. This is what happens when you walk in, and you always walk, in circle you always walk a certain direction. You don't come in and walk to the right, and if you start to, someone will correct you. . . . The first time I walked into a ritual . . . I walked by the altar and somebody had tied on these wonderful ribbons to one of the tools. Some witches . . . are just freakish about if you touch our tools, you know. The power drains out of it. . . . I walk by and my toes snag in these ribbons and it pulls off a knife. I'm like, "Oh my God, one of their tools is now on the ground in front of everybody!" . . . I'm mortified and I thought, Can I touch this tool, can I bend down and pick it up? . . . I'm not even initiated. . . . But one of the elders came and picked it up and put it back on the altar. And I went, "Whew!"

Formal and intuitive knowing. Knowledge that is the outcome of the learning in this community of practice is a combination of explicit, formal knowledge and implicit, tacit understanding. Gwydion Mordraig, a lawyer, talked about being too much of a rational intellectual prior to finding Wicca. Wicca has allowed him to "become more in touch with intuition and emotion"; he has become "someone [who] has embraced an intuitive mystery religion." Ariell commented that "someone can help guide you and show you where the doors are," but in terms of intuitively "connect[ing] to the divine . . . you have to open the door." Minerva recognized from childhood that her knowledge was intuitive. But before joining Wicca, she did not "know what to do with those things that I knew were inside me." In Wicca, she found that "people already knew and I saw the same things in the people that I already knew about myself." Ariell compared her intuitive knowing to a "core download":

> The best way I can describe [this learning is] at several points in my life I received a core download. Okay, and those years of reflection were basically sorting out files and I'm basically still doing that today. Oh, that goes over in this file. All right, I got that. So that's been my process, is figuring out what all the stuff that I got meant . . . you already have the answers, what you need are the questions.

Shared knowledge. The learning and knowledge in a Wicca community of practice is spread throughout the group and, according to Arwen, "consists of varying levels [of expertise] within the covens." It is a give-and-take process in which novices would "get together and work towards our first degree." Becoming second degree follows in which "you had to be able to teach somebody up to first degree. So you're transferring your knowledge, you're giving back. . . . And third degree you

have your own coven, you initiate people all the way up to third degree." Cerulia talked about how her coven of 13 "were all teaching each other." When doing a circle together, they planned the rituals, deciding who would do what each time: "Everybody would be assigned a part because it was important that everybody take part." Aurora Twilight told how in the process of learning, there is

> the period of time where you are getting to know your place and your talents within the Wiccan group because everybody has talents, everyone has different callings as well. Not all of us are great ritual priests and priestesses. Some of us can't string two sentences together in front of a crowd. . . . We've all got things that we do really, really well.

The knowledge learned within each coven or each tradition is meant to be shared and in so doing contributes to the larger body of work. Gwydion Mordraig pointed out that "any initiate can answer questions and often do, and we all consider . . . part of our service to the church and to the religion [is] to extend the knowledge that we have learned to others." Daryl, who combines two traditions, explained,

> So I know her tradition and I know [the other] and I use the two, that's why I'm recognized because there are things in both of them that work better and I like to integrate. And that's part of the job, too. You want somebody to do that because it furthers the whole work.

Identity Development

The third major finding of our study is that there exists a clear process of identity development that accompanies the learning in practice and the movement from periphery to center. In our study, the "increasing sense of identity as a master practitioner" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 111) evolved as participants learned more, became more proficient in practice, and moved through the ranks of their particular tradition. Lady Devayana recounted her journey and ongoing learning:

> [Being initiated] that's just the start. When you're initiated, you know, know thyself is the lesson—that's the first degree. . . . [After] five or so years . . . I became a second degree and that's when you become sort of a teacher of the group. . . . [Third degree] that's where you start all over again because the third is total and complete dedication to service. . . . And elder stuff is the big, is the big, you know, tamale, and believe me it's not. It's where you start from scratch and you know full well that you are a servant, and that's where you really, really need to learn.

Learning and identity development are interrelated and interdependent. Lady Ramona captured this connection in her discussion of a picture that showed three women at different phases in their development as witches:

> We all start out as maidens. We are very pure. We don't know who we are. Then we become the mother that is attached to the goddess [and there is] recognition of our duality and then the crone, which is the 3rd degree is the wise one that has lived through the maiden and the mother stage, and then she becomes who she is and can pass along the wisdom and teaching.

Taking a Wiccan name. Taking on a craft name is a very visible aspect of the identity development implicit in being a member of this community. Typically, names are chosen from Celtic, Nordic, Native American, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman mythology, although one can also make up a name. Commonly done when one is initiated into a coven, the ritual is taken quite seriously. As naming has power, one is expected to have a full understanding of the name selected and its positive and negative connotations. A number of our participants reported "receiving" a name while in a meditative state.

As explained by Lord Hermes, the name both affirms who they are at this time in their lives, as well as embodies characteristics they aspire to incorporate into their personality. Lady Kyairthwen explained how her name is the Scottish Gaelic version of *Cerridwen* and how this name is affecting her life:

> I wanted that inspiration from her sacred cauldron into my life. Ironically enough after I took the name in sacred space my creativity flew off the scale. I started really being much more craft-oriented and doing things with my hands. I stitch. I paint. I write. I draw. I make ceramics. . . . I killed every flower I owned until I found Wicca and selected this name and now I don't kill my plants. . . . And there are other aspects that I wanted to bring to my life as well. She's a mother. I want children very much.

Raven traces her name to Native American mythology where it ties in with healing and the magical. She explained just how a craft name affects identity:

> When you take a craft name, you have to be very careful about the energy you bring in because you will manifest it in your life. And so I was looking for something that would give me qualities that I wanted, psychic awareness, magical ability, and uh, personal responsibility as well as healing both for myself and other people. . . . My name for me really is part of who I am. It's something that I have incorporated and embraced and it doesn't go away when I leave these doors.

The taking of a Wiccan name, then, is a conscious effort to capture those qualities one aspires to, as well as reflecting who one is at the time.

Changing identity. Each person in our study was able to describe changes in his or her sense of self as a result of participating in the Wiccan community. They reported being more balanced and integrated, more reflective and tolerant, and more empowered.

Balance is an important concept in Wicca and, not surprisingly, participants felt Wicca afforded them a sense of balance in their lives. Gwydion Mordraig, for

example, felt he was overly rational and scientific. In Wicca he has "become more in touch with intuition and emotion." He came to realize "that reality and the nature of things is not nearly so concrete and so black and white . . . there's a lot more intuition and non-rational that needs to be taken to light." Now he sees that "science is becoming more magical and magic is becoming more scientific" and "what a magical and mystical place the universe really is." As a lawyer, he is "more receptive and helpful to people who have problems because I don't simply look at them from a technician's vantage."

Closely aligned with balance is the notion of being able to integrate aspects of the self into a whole and keep those aspects in balance. Cerulia is more confident, calmer, happier, and peaceful because Wicca "brought a balance in." She now feels "like one person rather than this person at work, and this person at home, and this person at the family reunion. I'm all one and that integration brings a lot of heart's ease and balance into your life."

Kyle uses the metaphor of a cracked mirror to explain his sense of self before becoming Wiccan:

> You know how when a mirror cracks you see different fragments? You know . . . you'll see yourself here and you'll see yourself here . . . they're all basically different mirrors at that point. So they're like different roles. . . . I was the good student, and I was the son, I was the faithful grandchild, that kind of thing. But I was never real, you know, it was shattered.

The study and learning Kyle went through to become Wiccan resulted in a different image in the mirror:

> And it was after I finally came to grips with all my inner issues [that] the mirror comes back together and those roles form an integrated person. So it's no longer having to deal with . . . is this me, is this me, or is this piece over here really me? When they all are. . . . They've merged back together and, okay, that is me. Those roles are me. They're what make up me.

The process of becoming Wiccan has had an effect on the way the participants think about the world, other people, and their being in the world. Participants talked about becoming more reflective and more tolerant. Little Bear said he has become "a much more introspective person." He linked this change with his development as an adult and as a Wiccan:

> As I grow older there is a natural tendency to look back on your life, a natural tendency to become introspective; however, that is colored to a great degree by the fact that I am a Wiccan. I have a command of techniques and knowledges that enable me to better interpret and understand where I am in the life stream than a person who isn't a Wiccan.

Raphael says Wicca challenged his worldview that there was "a right and wrong way to do things and that's it, period, end of story." Now "the horizons have been broadened considerably. . . . I'm a lot more able to resist the effort to . . . pigeon hole." He tries to look "for the shades of gray as opposed to a black or white answer to something." At the same time his "level of tolerance has increased." He is "able to look at all sides of the situation. So I am a little more tolerant, a little more understanding." Before Wicca, Lord Ziggy "didn't tolerate different people's ideas." Now he has an "open mind" that he has found helpful in his work situation where he deals with a number of minority groups.

Finally, several participants pointed to feeling stronger, more empowered after becoming Wiccan. Ramona, who characterized the learning process as "a being process," where there is "a gathering of energy," finds that she is stronger and "can make decisions and not feel guilty about them afterwards." Minerva claimed she is "more passionate about life than I was before, I feel more empowered on a daily basis." Raven is "more self-assured . . . less likely to be a doormat."

Daryl spoke to how being Wiccan imbues his work with a kind of strength and meaningfulness he would not have had otherwise. Daryl is a carpenter and explains how Wicca has made a difference in his work. He has been learning how to lead people on a construction site. He has figured out that

> they really like working for me because they feel like they're creating art, when they're working with me. And I want them to put a little bit of their soul into what they do. . . . And so the work that I would put my name on or that I would work with somebody to do is going to be good because my soul is in it; whoever else works in it, their soul's in it too. That's something that Wicca has added. . . . There's a reverence for work that Wicca has instilled in me that other people don't have.

Thus, for the participants in this community of practice, identity development is a major outcome of the interrelationship of the practice and the learning. As they move from the periphery to the center, they become witches of ever-increasing status and responsibility. They also assume a craft-related identity that reflects who they are and who they would like to become. Identity is ever evolving. And their identity has been affected in various ways as they become more balanced and integrated, more reflective and tolerant, and more empowered.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how a marginalized or stigmatized community of practice, that of witches, functions in terms of participation, learning, and identity. A trajectory of participation was uncovered, as was a model of learning in practice and a process of identity development. Following is a discussion of these findings and their implications for adult learning.

Although the movement from periphery to center is quite like other communities of practice, we speculate that because it is a marginalized group it is more difficult to join, and, once a member, an individual's movement is more formalized and closely monitored by elders in the group. All participants spent years searching for a spiritual home and studying on their own before a chance encounter led them to a Wiccan community. Because Wiccans are wary of their faith being distorted or sensationalized by uninformed fringe types, participants commented about being scrutinized before being allowed to join a coven. Interestingly, we as researchers were told that we also had been thoroughly checked out as to our credibility and intentions before we were given access to participants. Certainly, the majority of communities of practice form quite informally at work, in our families, and in relation to our social and civic interests (Wenger, 1998). It can be speculated that the strong gatekeeping we found with Wiccan groups might be due to their marginalized status.

Likewise, the movement from newcomer to elder was quite formalized, involving multiple levels or degrees of knowledge and craft expertise. Whether in a seminary associated with a large church or in a small coven, a prescribed curriculum that takes years to master forms the basis for moving from the periphery to the center. In Lave and Wenger's (1991) legitimate peripheral participation model, it is increasing engagement and activity that characterizes the core or center of the community. Billett (1998) also speculated that this movement is based in part on prior knowledge: "Individuals' existing concepts and procedures will determine how they are able to participate in particular activities and consequently learn from those activities. This base of knowledge includes attitude and preference" (p. 30).

Level of involvement and existing knowledge are certainly factors influencing one's movement from periphery to center. These participants in particular were highly educated professionals who had undertaken years of self-study as part of their spiritual journey. In addition to actual practice, however, there is a significant body of knowledge to be mastered. For a marginalized group, such knowledge is difficult (if not impossible) to acquire through mainstream means; hence, it becomes part of the community of practice's curriculum.

According to Wenger (1998), although communities of practice are local, they "cannot be considered in isolation from the rest of the world, or understood independently of other practices. Their various enterprises are closely interconnected" (p. 103) in part because each individual member is himself or herself a member of several communities of practice. However, our data suggest that a marginalized community of practice, although relating to other like communities (in this case, other Wiccan groups), cannot chance interacting openly with mainstream communities of practice. Fearing being stigmatized, ostracized, or harassed (Blundo, 2001; Warwick, 1995), the majority of participants in our study kept their Wiccan community of practice a secret; there was little intersection between their Wiccan lives and other communities, even family communities in some cases. Lord Ziggy, for example, who was at one time suspended from his job with an airline when his

beliefs became known, has learned that "you just don't do it," that is, reveal you are a witch. Lady Devayana, who is the high priestess of her coven, teaches high school and offers an occasional course on the witch in literature and history. But because "they don't know" and think her interest is purely academic, she might "have a real witch come 'cause the kids wanted to meet a real witch." So although these participants were relatively privileged in the rest of their lives by being White, well educated, and professional, this social capital had little effect on revealing their membership in this marginalized group.

In addition to offering some insights into how participation in a marginalized community of practice might differ from the mainstream, this study yielded some specific insights into the learning and identity formation process characteristic of such communities. Learning through classes, self-study, and mentoring were intertwined with informal, experiential learning. It is important to note that the majority of our participants belonged to a coven that had its own seminary offering a progression of classes leading to becoming a Wiccan. Thus, the formal learning component may have been more visible with this sample; however, those participants not in this coven also enrolled in classes and workshops, albeit on a more ad hoc basis.

Although one would expect classes and self-study to be part of learning when joining any social group, we were impressed by the prevalence of mentoring. Perhaps marginalized groups such as Wicca must rely more heavily on personal guidance and educating their own than those groups for which it is perfectly acceptable to educate through mainstream channels. The prevalence of mentoring might also be attributed to the nature of the Wiccan religion itself. Although there are certain general principles and practices adhered to by all Wiccans, each coven has its own traditions that are passed on orally and experientially from elders to newcomers.

What we labeled as *mentoring* can also be seen as apprenticeship, "generational encounters" (Wenger, 1998, p. 99), modeling, or guidance, components central to social learning theory. All the participants spoke of significant others who had assisted them in very direct ways in learning the practice of Wicca. Calling this process legitimate peripheral participation, Wenger wrote that this is the way practice is opened up to newcomers: "To open up practice, peripheral participation must provide access to all three dimensions of practice: to mutual engagement with other members, to their actions and their negotiation of the enterprise, and to the repertoire in use" (p. 100). And it is the elders of the community who provide this access. Wenger suggested that organizations would be more effective in training newcomers if they provided more official recognition of "Old-timers . . . [who] spend energy introducing these newcomers into the actual practice of their community" (p. 100).

Equally important was learning through observation, experimentation, reflective practice, and making mistakes. Nearly a century ago, John Dewey (1917) recognized the link between learning and experience; indeed, for him, "Education is that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience (pp. 89-90). As Raven noted, there was a "difference between a word

experience and a world experience." All participants underscored how crucial this type of learning was to their really understanding and grasping what it meant to be a Wiccan. It was only through doing the rituals and reflecting on their experiences that meaning-making and hence a sense of ownership occurred. For the norms, beliefs, and practices of Wiccan to become integrated into the self, formal learning had to be in conjunction with experiential learning.

The heavy component of informal learning in the form of rituals, practice, trial and error, and so forth may be particularly characteristic of Wiccans whose religious practices and beliefs are more experiential, intuitive, and earth based rather than intellectualized. However, Wenger's (1998) community of practice theory is about learning in practice; formal intellectual knowledge may inform this practice, but it is in the doing that one learns and moves from the periphery to the center. As Wenger pointed out, the learning in a community of practice "is not an object to be handed down from one generation to the next" (p. 102). Learning and the evolving identity of the community occur through practice:

> Practice is an ongoing, social, interactional process, and the introduction of newcomers is merely a version of what practice already is. That members interact, do things together, negotiate new meanings, and learn from each other is already inherent in practice—that is how practices evolve. (p. 102)

Social interaction was key to this learning and subsequent identity development. Participants realized they were not alone on this journey; in community with others, they could engage in rational discourse and gain confidence in their new role within the group. Through group support and encouragement, they were able to make meaning of their situation—meaning that was solidified in a comfortable, emotionally safe environment.

This study also yielded some insights into the connection between learning and identity development. According to Wenger (1998), "Building an identity consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities" (p. 145). Our data confirm that intensive learning is at the heart of the process. It is the lynchpin without which there would be no changes in identity. The intertwining of development and learning is at least implicit in developmental models of identity formation. Mezirow and Associates (2000), for example, wrote that "development in adulthood may be understood as a learning process—a phased and often transformative process of meaning becoming clarified through expanded awareness, critical reflection, validating discourse, and reflective action" (p. 25). This learning process is situated within the social world. "Human beings are essentially relational. Our identity is formed in webs of affiliation within a shared life world. . . . It is within the context of these relationships, governed by existing and changing cultural paradigms, that we become the persons we are" (p. 27). Indeed, one learns to become a witch through the community of practice. Identity as a witch

evolves from the initiation stage to that of elder. An important moment in this process is the taking on of a craft name. For all participants, the chosen name reflected characteristics of the present self as well as those attributes one aspired to integrate into the self.

Our participants were able to describe just how being a member of a Wiccan group had affected their identities. These changes were very much integrated into the participants' sense of self—they felt more balanced, reflective, and empowered. A future study might examine the extent to which particular effects on identity are specific to the social group, that is, would participants in a community of practice at work, for example, report different changes in their identity? And to what extent is the nature of the identity development dependent on the particular practice of the group?

In summary, this study of a community of practice illuminated the interrelationship of participation, practice, learning, and identity and is largely supportive of the social theory of learning put forth by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). Looking at a marginalized community, in particular, pointed to some possible variance from mainstream groups in terms of the controlled movement from periphery to center, the extent of formal knowledge integrated with informal practice, the extent of interaction with other communities of practice, and the evolution of identity as a witch. It would be interesting indeed to compare this study's findings on learning and practice to other nonnormative communities of practice of interest to adult educators such as those based on race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, and so forth.

The study also offered some insights helpful to practitioners wishing to stimulate and facilitate significant learning—learning that has to do with "our ability to negotiate meaning," learning that is "not just the acquisition of memories, habits, and skills, but the formation of an identity" (Wenger, 1998, p. 96). Our findings underscore the holistic, integrative nature of learning and affirm the use of multiple approaches to learning. Clearly, the most significant learning in our lives takes place in practice, embedded in the social context of our lives. The most significant learning is also transformative, changing who we are and our subsequent interaction with others. Adult educators might draw on what we know about learning in communities of practice to foster significant learning in both informal and formal settings. Although clearly there is a cognitive dimension to learning, this study points out the shared nature of the learning, the need for practice, freedom to make mistakes, and opportunities to discuss experiences and reflect on those experiences. The classroom itself can be viewed as a community of practice where knowledge is shared and expertise resides not only with the instructor but also across the community. This study also suggests that when discussing issues of marginalization or working with learners from marginalized groups, the environment must be supportive, safe, and accepting for significant learning to take place.

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