

Things to remember when interviewing modern Pagans

The Inside Perspective

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Abstract

This essay offers some perspectives on fieldwork not from the usual perspective of the fieldworker, but rather from the perspective of the person being researched, and the author speaks from their experience as someone who is an active Pagan and who has held offices in Pagan groups in the UK and as such has been on the receiving end of field research and of the misconceptions that often bedevil the way that research is directed.

Keywords

Perspective of the 'researchee'; research on contemporary alternative spiritualities and religious movements; Paganism; Druidry; Animism.

This essay will not, as most other contributions to this thematic issue do, speak from the perspective of the researcher, but from the perspective of the researched person, speaking primarily from my own recollections and experience. I have been involved for over twenty years, to a greater or lesser degree, with several forms of Paganism, initially Kemetic, then Witchcraft, then Druidry, and, finally, pantheistic Animism; this involvement has taken place mostly within British contexts. I have been interviewed by a number of researchers over the years, mainly in my Druidic period, but also later, and I have been involved for a while in the upper echelons of one of the Druid organisations, so I am well placed to know the misconceptions that bedevil many enquiries into modern Paganism.

The first and maybe most important point is: never expect clear, standardised results. It has been said with some truth that, if you gather a dozen Pagans together for any purpose, you will hear about twenty different forms of Paganism that they declare that they follow.

This has a huge impact if you want to use questionnaires as a research method. If you are planning to set up a standard questionnaire to cover any broad range of religions including Paganisms, then you are giving yourself a problem to start with. Just take the basic point of what people mean by a 'deity'. Not all Paganisms, and, come to that, not all religions, have the same concept of deity. Monotheistic religions, that have probably the most followers worldwide, have few equivalents in Paganism. They do exist, but you will find, on questioning their followers, that there is often a blurring between monotheism and polytheism, usually on the basis of a statement that 'all god(desse)s are one god(dess)'. But then it could be argued that some forms of Hinduism do exactly the same thing. People who follow one of these forms of Paganism often have a particular god or goddess (or one or more of each) that they prefer

to work with. Paganisms can be monotheistic, bitheistic, henotheistic, polytheistic, panentheistic, or pantheistic. The differences are not always logically adhered to within any given Paganism, which can provide pitfalls for the unwary. It is perfectly possible for a pantheist to be a polytheist at the same time. Was it not Terry Pratchett that declared in one of his books that all gods came into existence together a fraction of a second after the Big Bang? On that basis pantheism and polytheism can coexist quite amicably. Deities can be male, female, male and female at the same time, or non-binary, or sexless. It is always a good idea to establish how a research subject relates to deity first and to understand that a specific individual may not have fully thought this through. If you want to study Paganism, you have to be aware just how complex these issues are and tailor your research methods to this complexity. In my experience, more researchers than you would think fail to do so.

Paganisms are highly syncretic and often borrow ideas and rituals from other Paganisms and established religions, and even TV and film scripts on occasion, on the basis of ‘if it works use it’. Ritual can be fixed and held to strictly, or formed more loosely, or the whole thing can be made up on the hoof. Individual Pagans have different attitudes to ritual. Some do not consider it as ‘worship’ at all, but as a conversation with the particular deity or spirit that they wish to communicate with. Alternatively it can be more to cement the relationships within the community and less to do with communication with deity at all. In that way it could be argued that it follows closely modern attitudes within Anglican Christianity. Although there tends to be an overall structure to ritual in most (but not all!) Paganisms, the central part of the ritual is more often written for the specific occasion. This by no means invalidates it in the eyes of most Pagans, in fact it makes it more relevant. This is an important point and the researcher needs to be aware of these varying attitudes (that can easily occur within a single group) as it will have a bearing on how the researcher needs to proceed within any given group.

A question that in my experience keeps coming up is the issue of clothing. Ritual dress can vary widely. Some groups have elaborate robes varying with office, whereas others feel robes to be necessary but very much do their own thing, and these groups can be highly colourful and attract the notice of the general public when performing ritual in public spaces. It may be worth asking why a particular dress is worn. These days for outside ritual I tend to use a black robe with red detailing. When asked why, I refer the enquirer to Tacitus’s description of the wild women dressed in black who screamed obscenities at the Roman army when they invaded Anglesey. I once had an interviewer who kept asking about my dress in ritual, and it gradually dawned on me that she wanted to know whether I performed ritual naked but hadn’t the guts to ask me directly. Please don’t follow her example. Ask the question you want answered in a direct manner, whether it is about clothes or about anything else. By the way, these days I don’t do naked ritual!

Attitudes to authority can vary within Paganisms from a willingness to co-operate to a distinct unwillingness and downright anarchic opposition to any co-operation. With these groups the researcher can expect resistance, lack of co-operation, or a mischievous desire to

mislead. So be wary and try to check what you are being told! I remember that a government in the past decided it wanted one group to represent all Pagans that the powers that be could deal with. So the Public Bodies Liaison for British Paganism (PEBBLE) came into existence. I was a member for a while, representing a Druid group. It didn't last very long. Of course not all groups could be represented as it would have become unwieldy, so those that weren't naturally objected, as did those who had no desire for co-operation in the first place, saying that the body in no way represented them. In the face of this most of the major Pagan groups also left one by one, and it finally vanished without trace. It did manage to produce a Pagan Oath for use in UK Law Courts, which is still being used to this day, probably the only thing of lasting value that it did do. You may find such a lack of co-operation to be very frustrating and you may need to get the trust of a group by explaining why your research is important. Attitudes in the other direction can be one of suspicion and an insistence on making difficulties. I was once part of a deputation when a Pagan body wished to acquire charity status from the Charity Commission. They wanted a list of all our deities before they would consider the application. It also transpired that they were working on an old Enlightenment definition of deity as a 'Prime First Cause'. I asked if they had accepted Hindu charities, and on receiving a reply in the affirmative I asked if they had required a list of deities from them! Of course they hadn't. The body eventually got charity status. So don't be surprised, and don't let yourself be put off, by some contrariness. Some pagans have had experiences with institutions of authority, which is a category that also universities belong to, that have done little to dispense a basic suspicion that they will not be treated fairly. It is part of your job as a researcher to build up the trust necessary to overcome this suspicion, and to live up to it in the research that you publish afterwards.

A substantial body of academic research focuses on Pagan Groups that are overtly political on the extreme right. I must say that I have only come across one such group, and that was in Ireland. In my experience most Pagans I have come across have been decidedly left-liberal. What, if anything, this discrepancy means for you as a researcher and your research praxis, is something that ultimately only you can decide. The political stances can be very fuzzy at times, and attachment to a place and a specific culture may not necessarily indicate right-wing bias, but clearly the researcher needs to be careful.

There is one issue here that warrants thinking about. While Pagan groups use the term "pagan" as a positive term, historically it was implicitly a polemical one designating the non-Christian unbeliever who does not follow the path of truth. It associates the term with the country bumpkin and the village idiot. One wonders whether the underlying idea of a pagan as a misguided person does not sometimes still linger and, perhaps subconsciously, influence choices about which groups are chosen to be researched. I would never tell you not to research whatever groups you wish (at least if they are happy with your interest in them); but you do need to think about what underlying factors motivate your choice and make your decisions having that awareness.

I trust my meanderings will not have put any researchers off doing research into Paganisms at all. That would be sad, as the work would be worthwhile. I wish anyone who wishes to do such research all the best, and success in their task.