

NEO-SHAMANISM AS A HEALING SYSTEM: ENCHANTED
HEALING IN A MODERN WORLD

by

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Anthropology

The University of Utah

August 2010

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The University of Utah Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the idea of enchantment, disenchantment, and re-enchantment, following Weber, at the intersection of traditional healing and modern society in the spiritual practice of neo-shamanism. Neo-shamanism as a healing system in the US is explored ethnographically.

Neo-shamanism is the application and practice of shamanic techniques in contemporary Western society and functions as a system of healing alternative to biomedicine. Following traditions of ancient shamanism from around the world, modern individuals use an altered state of consciousness to get information from extra-material realms (referred to as nonordinary reality) to effect healing for themselves, others, society, and the planet. The neo-shamanic worldview holds that the extra-material world is as real as the material; the physical and spiritual are merged and can be utilized to assist humans. This stands in conflict with what Weber referred to as modernity's disenchanted worldview—a Cartesian world where only the material is real. Modernity also places high emphasis on the individual. The modern self seeks autonomous self-cultivation, aspires to ground identity within, and desires to exercise independence, authority, choice, and expressivity. This is in contrast to the traditional self, which was embedded in the established order of things.

Some suggest that modernity's disenchantment is implicated in contemporary ills—of individuals, society, and the environment—and that neo-shamanism, because it

allows modern individuals to re-enchant the world, is well suited to address just such problems.

This research addresses the following:

- 1) The idea of a disenchanted modernity, its relevance for biomedicine, and how neo-shamanism may provide a re-enchanted cosmology for those who engage in it.
- 2) The implications that studying an unseen, extra-material phenomenon has for anthropological methodology. How does one study neo-shamanism: more specifically, how does one study an enchanted cosmology with disenchanted tools?
- 3) The results of my field work with the practitioners and participants of neo-shamanism, with attention to how neo-shamanism serves as an enchanted mechanism for healing in a disenchanted world.

These questions are explored through participant-observation and experiential participation in neo-shamanic activities and interviews with neo-shamanic practitioners and participants.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES.....	vii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ix
Chapters	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
(Dis)Enchantment, Modernity, and Ontology.....	1
Neo-Shamanism: Counter-Reaction to Disenchanted Modernity.....	3
Alternative Religions and Healing: Neo-Shamanism’s Modern Lineage.....	8
Modern Individuals: The Detraditionalized Self.....	13
II BACKGROUND.....	19
Neo-Shamanism.....	19
Anthropology and (Neo)Shamanism.....	28
An Ethnographic Study of Modern Shamanism in the US: Enchanted Healing in a Disenchanted World.....	40
III METHODS.....	46
Studying Neo-Shamanism.....	46
Experiential Anthropology.....	49
IV RESULTS.....	63
Data Collection and Analysis.....	63
Probability Odds Logistic Regression Analysis Results.....	101
Summary of Results.....	106
V DISCUSSION.....	110
Enchantment.....	110

	Neo-Shamanism as a Healing System.....	139
VI	CONCLUSION.....	167
	(Re)Enchantment.....	169
	Enchanted Healing.....	171
	Enchanted Modernity.....	172
Appendices		
	A: GLOSSARY.....	176
	B: POPULAR LITERATURE.....	180
	REFERENCES.....	184

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Data Collection Activities: Pilot Study and Fieldwork, November 2003- November 2008.....	69
2. Interview Demographic Data Self-Identified by Participants.....	74
3. Demographic Composition of Study Population.....	75
4. Healing for Emotional Issues.....	88
5. Healing for Physical Conditions.....	92
6. Finding Community.....	96

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Age Distribution of Interview Sample.....	78
2. Level of Education Completed of Interview Sample.....	79
3. Level of Income of Interview Sample.....	80
4. Self-Identified Race of Interview Sample.....	81
5. Shamanic Traditions/Schools in which Interview Sample Received Training, Schooling, or Healing.....	82
6. Emotional Issues Reported in Interview Sample.....	87
7. Emotional Healing Reported in Interview Sample.....	89
8. Physical Problems Reported by Interview Sample.....	91
9. Physical Healings Reported by Interview Sample.....	93
10. Social Disembeddedness Issues Reported by Interview Sample.....	95
11. Social Embeddedness Reported by Interview Sample.....	97
12. Level of Engagement of Interview Sample.....	99
13. Level of Enchantment of Interview Sample.....	100
14. Level of Enchantment as Correlated with Level of Engagement.....	102
15. Level of Enchantment as Correlated with Level of Education.....	104
16. Level of Engagement as Correlated with Number of Shamanic Traditions.....	105

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would have never come to completion without the guidance and support of many, many people in my life. I would like to thank my committee members. Dr. Polly Wiessner, you are a champion for your students and I survived in the material world much due to your concern for my welfare. Thank you for your guidance and support and for always going to bat for me over the years. Dr. Laurence Loeb, I can always count on you for critical insight and fatherly understanding. I hold my relationship with you dear to my heart. Dr. Bonnie Glass-Coffin, your deep understanding of this subject was a beacon during this long process and I thank you for the opportunity to teach in your stead when you were on sabbatical. Dr. Allan Ainsworth, you lent a helping hand when I was foundering early in my doctoral program and I thank you for your coaching during that crucial step of this process and your unflinching support. Dr. Naomi Silverstone, your rich experience in this subject as well as the “real world” of counseling for just the sort of people who come to neo-shamanism lent an important perspective to my project. Thank you.

I also must thank my many friends, especially those who tracked with me on this project and through discussion increased my understanding of the esoteric, the members of the MHC, and my hiking, climbing, and running partners over the years –you know who you are. In this vein, my dogs Bridgette (RIP), Sheila, and Bruce kept me honest about getting outside just about every day. I stand by my principle: no matter how much

work there is to be done, an hour or two out-of-doors only increases productivity, while supporting health and sanity.

To each of the individuals who participated in this research and gave tirelessly of themselves to help me understand what modern shamanism is all about, the depth of my gratitude cannot be expressed. Particularly I would like to thank my regular “shaman coffee talk” group. You guys are the best.

And, finally, of deep importance, I thank my mother, Trudi, for her early and unfailing message to me: “You can do anything you want.” And I did.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

(Dis)Enchantment, Modernity, and Ontology

Modernity, according to Weber (1946), *disenchanted* the world:

...there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather... one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. (139)

His argument points to the Cartesian differentiation of matter and spirit as the hallmark of the modern era. This separation allowed for the development of science outside the authority of the Church, and what can be called the *dignities* of modernity—

...liberal democracies, the ideals of equality, freedom, and justice, regardless of race, class, creed, or gender; modern medicine, physics, biology, and chemistry; the end of slavery; the rise of feminism; and the universal rights of human kind. (Wilber 1998: 11).

Despite these dignities, modernity is criticized for its hegemonic worldview. Because of its emphasis on the external, material, and measurable, modernity is said to offer a dissatisfactory, disenchanted cosmology. Science, the explanatory tool of choice in the modern world, does not answer the questions posed by Tolstoi: “What should we do?” and “How should we arrange our lives?” (Weber 1946: 143). Science does not address issues of meaning and the deep nature of being (Berman 1981; Howe 2006; Weber 1946;

Wilber 1998). Weber (1930) states that such a world results in deep spiritual isolation and profound inner loneliness.

Berman (1981) suggests that Weber's modern isolation and profound loneliness stems from an unmet evolved human need for ontology, which Fuller (2001) describes as a "spiritual need of having a felt-sense of the sacred" (10). Human neurophysiology evolved not only under the selective pressures of a material environment, but also within a network of relationships, including relationships with the extra-material, unseen environment (Winkleman 2004; Sosis 2004). These relationships as selective pressure are taken to have resulted in a merger and identification with one's material and extra-material surroundings. Berman (1981) refers to this merger as *participating*

consciousness:

The view of nature which predominated in the West down to the eve of the Scientific Revolution was that of an enchanted world. Rocks, trees, rivers, and clouds were all seen as wondrous, alive, and human beings felt at home in this environment. The cosmos, in short, was a place of *belonging*. A member of this cosmos was not an alienated observer of it but a direct participant in its drama. His personal destiny was bound up with its destiny, and this relationship gave meaning to his life. (16)

This merger presumes a moral layer to the material world. In contrast, *scientific consciousness* is "alienated consciousness: there is no ecstatic merger with nature, but rather total separation from it" (Berman 1981: 17). It is this *idea*, a dichotomous view of premodern and modern life, that is a foundation for the Romantic counter-reaction to modernity that neo-shamanism stems from.

There are modern individuals living in contemporary society who experientially encounter an enchanted cosmos in the course of their lives, and some whose day-to-day lived experience is that of a participating consciousness. This experience with an enchanted world in a society founded upon disenchanting assumptions generates tension.

Finkler (1994) and Dressler (2000; 2005) alike demonstrate how illness can result when lived experience is out of sync with the larger social contract, that is, the way the world is supposed to work and how an individual's life is supposed to be in that world. The tension resulting from an enchanted experience within a disenchanted social context may produce anomie, which may manifest in emotional/psychological or physical illness, alienation, or fear that one is insane. The neo-shamanic worldview can provide relief from this tension, healing its consequences and providing a framework within which enchanted lived experience makes sense.

Neo-Shamanism: Counter-Reaction to Disenchanted Modernity

A desire for means to ontological satisfaction is evident in the long tradition of counter-reaction to the material orientation of modernity (Berman 1981; Heelas 1996; Jakobsen 1999; Ray & Anderson 2000; von Stuckrad 2002; Wilber 1998). Romanticism in the 19th century, and the 20th century *Naturphilosophie* of holding compassionate empathy for an animated natural world paralleled the developments of modernity (Berman 1981; von Stuckrad 2002; Wilber 1998). Shamanism, transformed for contemporary society, is but a recent manifestation of this counter-reaction to “the mechanization and disenchantment of nature, cosmos, and the human self” i.e., modernity (von Stuckrad 2002: 791).

Carlos Castaneda brought shamanism to the forefront of American consciousness in 1968 with his book *The Teachings of Don Juan: a Yaqui Way of Knowledge*. His enchanted reports of accessing extra-material realities, which he calls *nonordinary reality*, through peyote under the guidance of Don Juan, a Yaqui shaman, fell into the

open arms of a jumbled American counter-culture experimenting with psychoactive drugs, Eastern philosophies, free love, and, in general, acting out against the mundane materiality of modernity as manifest in US society (Bellah 1996: Heelas 1996: MacDonald 1995, Noel 1999). The resulting interest in ontology and attention to Native spiritual traditions persisted, and is evident in Michael Harner's 1980 book *The Way of the Shaman*. He translated what he considered (nearly) universal traditional shamanic elements into an acultural package of practices for the modern shamanic seeker and participant.

The result is a new, modern shamanism, in which traditional shamanic techniques and ideas are transformed into modern society into a constellation of techniques, practices, and beliefs about the nature of illness and the best way to heal it. It is referred to variously as modern shamanism, contemporary Western shamanism, American shamanism, and neo-shamanism. I will use the terms neo-shamanism and modern shamanism interchangeably throughout this paper. The term *neo-shamanism* points to the new form of shamanism in modern society, a reworking of traditional shamanism in a new context, while the term *modern shamanism* reminds us that traditional shamanism has been in fact transformed into a modern phenomenon for modern individuals. Neo-shamanism is a contemporary cultural phenomenon.

Neo-Shamanism

Neo-shamanism is a contemporary cultural phenomenon varied in form but not in function. Harner (1980) follows Eliade's lead, and defines it rather precisely as the practice of traveling to an extra-material reality, which is organized into Lower, Middle,

and Upper worlds, in an altered state of consciousness in order to get information to help self and others. Villoldo (2000), another leader of modern shamanism in contemporary society, defines it more broadly as energy medicine, a “direct engagement with the forces of Spirit,” teaching that the shaman is a “self-realized person” who calls Spirit from the heart, with a voice of love, and the Universe conspires on his or her behalf (22, 98, 138). Participants¹ in the study reported here used a variety of phrases to characterize neo-shamanism, such as: “a path of power,” “working with spirits in an altered state such that observable changes are made in ordinary reality,” “a simple connectedness with your environment and an understanding of your relationship to the world,” “direct inspiration,” “an uncovering of lost knowledge,” “a technique to get down deep into the psyche and reality,” a way to “command to see the spirits,” as integrated and holistic, and finally, as “the interrelationship of all things” —the “web of life.” Elizabeth, a middle aged neo-shamanic participant, described shamanism as a tool of not ordinary perception to find balance:

Shamanism to me would be finding the balance and reminding you of whatever it feels like you need to be reminded of, usually a little bit heavier on the Other Side or the Other perceptions. You know, who is a person but the sum of everything?
(Elizabeth, neo-shamanic participant)

A common theme is contact or communion with beings and energies that inhabit an unseen, extra-material reality to effect healing in self, others, and the planet. Central is the premise that we live in an enchanted world, rich with an unseen, energetic reality, alongside and in addition to the material world.

Through neo-shamanism, the modern individual, who has been enculturated into the premises of a disenchanting cosmos and been handed the tools of a scientific

¹ All quotes and paraphrases from participants in this study presented in this document come from interview transcripts or field notes unless otherwise indicated. All participant names are pseudonyms.

consciousness with which to navigate that cosmos, hearkens back to a time of (albeit romanticized) close relation to nature and communion with the spirit world. This romanticized, authentic shaman is held up as wise sage and healer, with skills and tools to mediate between the material and spirit worlds. In this between-worlds travel the shaman brings healing to the individuals of his or her community, as well as the community as a whole.

Modern Shamanic Participants

The modern shamanic participant is seeking solace in what has been described as a world of stupefying jobs, meaningless work, and vapid and transient relationships, in which “Americans try to reconstruct their lives amidst a pervasive feeling of anomie and cultural disintegration” (Berman 1981:17). Noel (1999) suggests this is, in shamanic terms, soul loss² at a cultural level. His premise is that because imagination has been invalidated as an epistemological stance in Western thought, we have lost the ability to take our imaginal experiences seriously, and have thus lost the soul of our culture, and ourselves.

In contrast, Harner (1980) takes a literal stance regarding the disenchanting nature of modern culture. He presents an external, not imaginal, animated shamanic cosmology—a result of his experiences in traditional cultures while doing anthropological research. Noel’s ability to imagine is for Harner an unprejudicing of epistemologies, the undoing of what he terms *cognicentrism*, the idea that one’s own way of thinking is superior to all others and the only way to judge what is real. His remedy

² *Soul Loss* is a cross-cultural shamanic disease category: an individual can lose part of his or her soul (thus his or her vital essence) as a result of trauma or inter-personal relationships. See Chapter V.

for the cognicentric tendencies of the Western disenchanted paradigm is first-hand experience with direct ways of knowing. Harner (1980) suggests that many modern individuals have

...left the Age of Faith behind them. They no longer trust ecclesiastical dogma and authority to provide them with adequate evidence of the realms of the spirit or, indeed, with evidence that there is spirit. Second and/or third-hand anecdotes in competing and culture-bound religious texts from other times and places are not convincing enough to provide paradigms for their personal existence. They require higher levels of evidence. (xi-xii)

An essential element of the tension generated by an enchanted lived experience in a society founded upon disenchanted assumptions is that in the desire for direct evidence the modern shamanic participant must navigate the prejudice for the material in the quest for the credible empirical evidence of the scientific paradigm, i.e., Western cognicentrism. Modernity's privileging of an empiricism anchored in material reality is an hegemony, discounting all other forms of empiricism. Neo-shamanism, to the contrary, rests on a broad empiricism, one which allows for evidence from direct experience in general not just that apprehended through the physical senses (Fuller 2001; Harner 1980; Wilber 1998). William James called this *radical* empiricism, an "empiricism that acknowledges 'inner' as well as 'outer' facts... included in any comprehensive interpretation of reality" (cited in Fuller 2001:129).

The modern reluctance of "taking someone else's word for it" manifests the spiritual need for a felt-sense of the sacred and creates an appeal for that which can be apprehended directly, empirically, and experientially by the individual. In the course of my research as I asked people to describe neo-shamanism it became apparent that the shamanic lived experience is all of these things, providing a very accessible and profound felt-sense of the sacred. One young practitioner, Melanie, stated that her engagement in

modern shamanism validated her experiences and made the spiritual more real to her. Another, a middle-aged participant named Nelda, said “Once you experience it, you know that it can’t be wrong!” It also became apparent it is an ineffable, “difficult to capture in words, difficult to explain, as the attempts at explaining [it] often result in explaining [it] away” (Lindquist 1997: 298). And indeed, study participants were often at a loss for words to adequately describe their modern shamanic experiences.

Alternative Religions and Healing: Neo-Shamanism’s
Modern Lineage

History of Alternative Religion

*People today hunger not for personal salvation...
but for the feeling...of personal well-being
(Fuller 2001:124).*

Modernity, rooted in the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, resulted both from and in the Cartesian split of the material and nonmaterial, separating fact from value (Berman 1981; Wilber 1998). Modernity’s secularization of society, the divide between the physical and spiritual, created a modern, mechanistic “flatland” in which, in place of meaning, everything is reduced to the lowest common physical explanation: joy becomes dopamine, love is reduced to the adrenals, and depression an imbalance of neurotransmitters —Weber’s *disenchantment* (Wilber 1998).

As a counter-reaction to the disenchantment of modernity, neo-shamanism fits into the general category of the New Age. The New Age is a complex of many traditions, techniques, and ideas centered around the idea that the world constitutes an expression of a higher, more comprehensive divine nature which is hidden within each

being. This higher divine nature can be awakened, becoming central to one's every day life and this awakening is the reason for each individual life's existence (Tarcher 1991).

The New Age is the contemporary manifestation of a long and rich history of alternative religion in the US. Colonial Era US religion encompassed pluralistic ideas and practices, which took a turn towards the intellectual during the mid to late 1700s. The early 19th century saw the rise of metaphysical movements, popular with individuals embracing intellectual progressivism coupled with mystical hunger. These metaphysical movements grew as the 19th century came to a close, culminating in forms such as New Thought, a philosophy which celebrated the inner divinity of every man and woman and in which mind is primary and matter is relegated to a secondary and resultant status (Fuller 2001).

Heelas (1996) argues that the counter-reaction to modernity's disenchantment is not only a reaction to, but radicalizes modernity. As such, alternative religions break from institutionalized religions in ways that fit with modernity's core values. For example, a fundamental element of alternative religions in the US was the desire to reconcile science and religion via empirical demonstration of spiritual phenomena. Another is a focus on the self. Modernity not only disenchanting the cosmos, but also *detraditionalized* the self (Heelas 1996; Porter 2003). The traditional self was embedded in the established order of things, sociocentric, the individual "lost in the depths of the social mass" (Durkheim 1992: 56). This traditional self looks *without* for guidance. The detraditionalized self, on the other hand, seeks autonomous self-cultivation, aspires to ground identity within, and desires to exercise independence, authority, choice, and expressivity (Heelas 1996). This modern sense of self does not *belong to* an overarching system but is *informed by* it. It is

described by Beck (1993) as a turn from the “we” of society to the “I” of the self. This modern “turn to the self” embraces a Western conception of the person which is a

bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background. (Geertz 1984: 126)

Alternative religions echo modernity’s turn to the self while rejecting the secularization of modern thought. Fuller (2001) suggests that modern seekers: 1) prefer to establish their own criteria for belief; 2) think along the lines of spirituality being a “sensibility,” that is, a total way of life, rather than a creed or dogma; 3) are impatient with institutional religion, feeling that the church has become stagnant; 4) have a new understanding of the self—affirming inner potential and connection to the divine, not the sinful nature of man; and 5) have a high interest in the metaphysical. Spiritual ignorance, not sin, becomes the fundamental human problem, and results in a contemporary high concern with seeking spiritual growth. Thus, the inner divinity of humans (in contrast to the sinful nature of), the premise that thoughts shape reality, and the idea that experiential spiritual engagement will transform the world and heal the fragmented West (divided, for example, into mind and body; male and female; matter and spirit) are common elements of alternative spiritualities in the US, attractive to modern individuals with an ontological need not met in mainstream religion (Fuller 2001). This is evident in the fourteen percent of Baby Boomers who are metaphysical seekers (Fuller 2001:98). They have been influenced by college level science courses and an educational atmosphere of liberal skepticism, and disenchanted by religion. They are looking for a spirituality that is not “old age,” has practical application, and is experiential (Fuller 2001; Ray & Anderson 2000)

And so, into a world of institutionalized theism, the Age of Reason

...instilled confidence in every person's potential for greater understanding, hope for the continued moral progress of the human race, and an inspiring vision that we are all sons and daughters of a rational, progressive deity. (Fuller 2001: 19)

Additionally, the Enlightenment “depicted a universe that is intelligible, harmonious, and thoroughly rational... [prompting] many intellectuals to rebel against Christian orthodoxy” (Fuller 2001: 18). *Deism*, the idea that God, after imparting a rational design to the universe, does not intervene in its operation, came to replace theism as rational thought came to replace what were considered to be magical and superstitious ideas. The turn to the self of modernity enhanced individual autonomy and this was echoed in new religious threads alternative to institutionalized religion.

Along with this “fit” into modern core concepts of the self, alternative religions reject the disenchanting nature of modern cosmology with its reliance on the material world, and, in the tradition of the Romantics, desire to commune with Nature Herself, alive and wondrous. Nature became evidence of divinity—a *pantheistic* worldview (Fuller 2001). The relationship with nature of traditional (premodern or tribal) peoples is romanticized by the West, into an assumption that, before humans started mucking everything up, people were necessarily in close harmonious communion with nature. This is in high evidence Hollywood in films such as Dancing with Wolves, The Lion King, and Pocohantas, as well as in the recent Hollywood blockbuster Avatar (Douthat 2009). Douthat (2009), in a *New York Times* op-ed piece, suggests that “divinizing the natural world is an obvious way to express unease about our hyper-technological society”—which carries its own irony, considering the hyper-technological feat of making the popular 3-D film (1).

Modern shamanism, following this traditional thread that has woven itself into contemporary society, goes past pantheism into *animism*, where all things have spirit and sentience. Instead of nature passively reflecting the divinity of creation, nature (and all other things) become sentient beings with whom which the individual using shamanic tools and techniques can communicate. From the shamanic perspective “everything is alive and animated—even stones, rivers and other allegedly ‘dead objects’” (von Stuckrad 2002: 779). This is not held as a belief, but simply the way in which the world is experienced— Berman’s *participating consciousness*.

History of Complementary and Alternative Medicines (CAM)

Accordingly, contemporary alternatives to biomedicine in the US grew out of the New Age and Holistic Health movements of the 1970s, with roots in the metaphysical flowerings of the 19th and 20th centuries just discussed (Baer 2004; Lewis & Melton 1992). The Holistic Health movement emphasized the whole person –physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and social– and was both a result of dissatisfaction with the dominant biomedical system and a counter-reaction to it. Its central tenets include health promotion and maintenance, imbalance as a cause of ill health, personal responsibility for one’s own health status, the innate healing capacity of the individual, and a “new consciousness” that included subjective and intuitive approaches to life. Similarly, recall that the New Age is founded on a desire to discover and experience the divine nature of both the self and the world. In concert with the currents of the New Age, a varied assortment of alternative medical therapies grew from the Holistic Health

movement, including the transpersonal psychology movement of the 1980s, generally blurring the distinction between spiritual practice and healing modality (Baer 2004).

Overlap between the New Age and Holistic Health movements is evident in their shared premises: both embody a positive, optimistic approach to life, a desire to appear modern and scientific, and an emphasis on healing and psychic powers (Lewis & Melton 1992). Both focus on a “balance in the interaction of mind, body, and spirit in [their] attempts to achieve experiential health and well-being” (Baer 2004:xii), and they both hold central the idea that extra-material (spiritual) energies are capable of influencing the physical, and thus implicated in disease and health (Fuller 2001). Beginning in the 1970s, this spiritual disease etiology was re-introduced into a modern understanding of health and disease in a novel way— the conventional religious frame of sin as a cause of disease was replaced by an inclination toward the divinity of all individuals. In this new frame, extra-personal (spiritual) forces impact the health of *divine*, not sinful, individuals for good or for bad. Neo-shamanism is one alternative healing system that embraces such a spiritual disease etiology.

Modern Individuals: The Detraditionalized Self

Recall that the counter-reaction, on both the spiritual and healing fronts, to modernity’s disenchantment has been characterized as both a reaction to and radicalization of modernity (Heelas 1996). It is, therefore, the *modern self* who engages in neo-shamanism, reacting to dissatisfaction with available mainstream sources of meaning— expressed, for example, as Weber’s Iron Cage of work in order to consume and the ecological crisis of the resultant lifestyles. As a reaction to a modernity in crisis,

neo-shamanism offers liberation from mundane modernity and more to life than identity as a consumer. It offers an alternative to those dissatisfied with the institutions of religion (for example, women dissatisfied with the patriarchy of institutional Christianity) and medicine (a desire for a deeper healing and recognition of the mind-spirit-body connection), and a mechanism for self-transformation in a world with overwhelming social problems. It is also a means to unlock hidden abilities and add meaning to the pursuit of prosperity (Heelas 1996).

However, while a reaction to modernity, neo-shamanism is also embedded in and exemplifies long-standing cultural trajectories. Neo-shamanism is a mechanism by which widely held modern (secular) values such as freedom, authenticity, self-responsibility, self-reliance, self-determination, equality, dignity, and the *self* as a value in and of itself become sacralized. So, too, are modern assumptions concerning the inner self and the intrinsic goodness of human nature, the idea that it is possible to change for the better, the importance of being true to oneself and exercising expressive ethicality, the person as the primary locus of authority, the importance of taking responsibility for one's life, distrust of traditions and the importance of liberation from the past and its restrictions, and the value of humans and of nature (Heelas 1996).

Despite modern shamanism's roots in traditional cultures, it is a phenomenon transformed for modernity, and undertaken by *modern individuals*. As such, neo-shamanism is both of and for modernity, while at the same time offering a reaction or alternative to it.

And so we come full circle. Weber's criticism of modernity is that it disenchanting the world. His thesis is premised on the romantic idea of a previously

enchanted world, one in which everything was animated with a sentient life force or spirit and people lived merged into a participating consciousness with nature, or more, with the entire cosmos. It is these *ideas* (whether accurate or not) which are the platform for the history of counter-reaction to modernity, and fit with modern assumptions about the individual and his or her place in the world. Neo-shamanism is essentially a group of assumptions, experiences, and techniques that are premised on and seek to regain that enchanted cosmos and a close communion with an animated world, while retaining the modern self.

In this schema, because all objects are animated and sentient they contain power, and accessing and working with this power is a foundation of shamanic practice, old and new. Shamanic communication with the animated cosmos can be employed for the well-being of the community or alternatively can be used to do harm (this is today usually termed sorcery to hold it in contrast to neo-shamanism's focus of doing no harm). Nadel (1946) emphasized that the Nuba shaman in the Southern Sudan had access to novel information. This allowed the shaman to help his community in times of transition and change. It also placed the shaman in an ambivalent status: there is an element of danger in access to power that could be used for harm, and to novel ideas and directives which might run counter to the status quo. Modern shamans engage with the power inherent in an animated world and, like the Nuba, gain access to novel information. In a modern context, this reinforces individual autonomy, expressivity, and the experience of self as locus of authority based on direct experiential empiricism.

Indeed, many participants in modern shamanism report that their teaching comes directly from the nonordinary spirit realm. For example, Estell, an experienced modern

shamanic practitioner and teacher described her experience learning from spirits as gentle suggestions: “You enter into a level of interplay [with your helping spirits] and... the spirits say ‘Would you do this? Would you connect in this way? This is what we suggest for you’.” Another, Dan, told me how he learned a specific shamanic technique:

I put up a spiritual-energy shield because there are people I work with that have intrusions. I have a teacher who taught me how to do that. A spirit teacher. That was his purpose to come to me, for that experience—learning to recognize, understand, heed, and remove intrusions. (Dan, neo-shamanic practitioner)

Karen, a full-time seasoned practitioner, while describing her work with a Mayan spirit guide in nonordinary (extra-material) reality, related how she came to have a painting of him hanging in her work-space:

I was working with a Mayan Spirit teacher and then was told to go to an activity that was going on in [the] park, and that there would be Mayans there with representations of him and that’s what he looks like, so...(Karen, neo-shamanic practitioner)

In sum, neo-shamanism, ostensibly modeled on *traditional* cultures, is ultimately a *modern* engagement with an animated cosmos. It functions as a spiritual practice and healing modality for *modern* individuals, emerging from desires for both autonomy and direct empirical experience of spirituality and health. As demonstrated above, modern shamanism did not suddenly appear in the landscape of modern society, but emerged from a long cultural trajectory of counter-reaction to modernity and institutionalized religion. It offers an enchanted spiritual experience and an enchanted framework for health and disease alternative to the biomedical model, holding experiential empiricism as highest authority.

In the most recent measures, over 38% of adults in the US use therapies alternative to biomedicine (NIH 2008:1), spending an estimated \$34 billion out-of-pocket (Eisenberg et al. 1998: 1573; NCCAM 2009). This suggests some level of dissatisfaction

with biomedicine and conventional psychotherapy. Biomedicine's modern assumption of and emphasis on the material can be perceived as limiting to those seeking a holistic and enchanted healing experience. Neo-shamanism is an alternative medicine that presupposes an enchanted world, which in turn presupposes an enchanted physiology. This suggests both a disease etiology and a therapeutic modality not available in biomedicine. With rising rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancers, depression, autism, asthma, chronic fatigue syndrome and similar conditions that biomedicine cannot yet cure, it is imperative to increase understanding of alternative therapies.

The research reported here investigates neo-shamanism as a healing system in an urban center in the Intermountain West region of the US. It examines the following questions: Does the enchanted premise of neo-shamanism serve to re-enchanted the world of the modern individual? If so, in the process of re-enchanted, do those who engage in neo-shamanism seek to re-embed the self in the social, that is to re-traditionalize the self, or do they seek to heal the Cartesian divide between body and mind/spirit for the individual alone? Do participants report healing and what is the nature of this healing? It will characterize the modern shamanic participant, discuss how neo-shamanism functions as a frame for the enchanted lived experience and provides a mechanism to re-enchanted the disenchanting modern individual, and will examine how participants engage in neo-shamanism as a spiritual healing system.

A Guide to this Dissertation

This dissertation is an ethnographic examination of neo-shamanism in the US. Chapter II introduces the form and practice of modern shamanism, and offers a review of

anthropological literature concerning this modern phenomenon. Chapter III is a discussion of the methodology employed in this study. The author weighs in on the controversy surrounding experiential participation in the study of unseen (spiritual) phenomena. Chapter IV presents the results of this research. Chapter V discusses the nature of (re)enchantment and neo-shamanic participants and neo-shamanism as a healing system. Chapter VI concludes this dissertation.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND

Neo-Shamanism

Shamanism is generally agreed to be the oldest healing modality known to humankind. Traditionally, the shaman uses an altered state of consciousness to engage with the spiritual world to effect healing for his or her community and the individuals therein (Eliade 1964; Winkleman 1990). Today, the principles and techniques of traditional shamanism are being transformed into contemporary society as a new, modern shamanism. Neo-shamanism, as it is sometimes called, is the modern application of shamanic techniques coupled with an *enchanted* cosmology in contemporary Western society. It functions as system of healing alternative to biomedicine and conventional psychotherapy.

The fundamental shamanic technique, both traditional and modern, is the *shamanic journey*. In this, the (neo)shaman travels into an extra-material (spiritual) realm in an altered state of consciousness in order to get information from spirit teachers and animals to help and heal self, others, and the environment (see, for example: Doore 1988; Harner 1980; Villoldo 2000). The altered state of consciousness utilized by the (neo)shaman can be induced either through chemical means, such as peyote, ayahuasca, and *San Pedro*, or nonchemical means, such as sonic driving by drum or rattle and sleep

deprivation. It is both a form of New Age spirituality and a system of healing. Neo-shamanism is a modern phenomenon and a counter-reaction to the disenchanting nature of modernity (von Stuckrad 2002; Weber 1918/1946).

Modern Shamanic Practice

People come to neo-shamanism for a variety of reasons. Generally they are looking for a spiritual practice, seeking healing, or simply curious. What they find is an eclectic system of practices and ideas that are designed around the premise that ancient peoples lived a life close to nature and in harmony with all living things, in a world animated with spirits, and that shamans were specialists in engaging that world. There is no single modern shamanic practice, tradition, or school. It is a diverse cultural phenomenon, grounded in the idea that, with practice, an individual can master travel between the ordinary world and an extra-material reality, and gain spiritual allies there. It is through this neo-shamanic travel that the individual finds healing, for self and others. Modern shamanism includes a variety of forms, and I will present a few here.

Central to the varied forms and activities of modern shamanism are *shamanic sight* and the *shamanic journey*. Shamanic sight is the ability to sense the extra-material world. This may be akin to “seeing” an aura around a person, place, or object, or to “hearing” information about someone or some thing. The shamanic journey, as stated above, entails accessing an altered state of consciousness, usually through auditory driving (drumming or rattling) while sitting still or lying down, in which the shamanic practitioner travels into nonordinary reality in order to get information for healing. Practitioners, participants, and sometimes clients, of modern shamanism will undertake

shamanic seeing and journeying to these realms as part of their engagement in neo-shamanism.

These neo-shamanic concepts and activities are based on an understanding of traditional shamanism as originally put forth by Mircea Eliade (1964) in his seminal book *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, originally published in French in 1954. Although Eliade's work has been criticized by the academe as more novel than ethnographic fact (Noel 1999) it stands as a foundational source of information about traditional shamanism for modern shamanic seekers. It is Eliade's work that presents the shamanic altered state of consciousness as a "stepping outside of" one's normal state of being in order to access an extra-material realm—the idea of ecstasy as taken from the Greek *ekstasis*. It is also from Eliade's work that flows the idea that shamanism is typified by an experience of "magical flight" into the Upper or Lower shamanic worlds. These shamanic worlds are separate from the material world we live in and include a Middle world, which is an unseen realm alongside material reality. They do not correlate to the Christian ideas of heaven and hell (Eliade 1964; Winkelman 2009). The traditional shaman uses this ecstatic state to create relationships with spirits to accomplish many tasks, including healing, divination and diagnosis, and obtaining food (tracking game in order to direct hunting activities) (Winkelman 2009). Accordingly, neo-shamans do the same, seeking healing, information, and even locating lost objects.

Individuals engage in neo-shamanic healing in three basic ways: 1) an individual can visit a neo-shamanic practitioner to address a health concern in a healing session, 2) an individual can participate in a personal neo-shamanic practice designed to support health and well-being, and 3) an individual can participate in group activities, like neo-

shamanic drum circles and workshops. The healing sessions I observed and participated in varied some among practitioners³, but this one will give the reader an idea of what goes on:

The client, Elaine (not her real name), arrives and sits on the floor in the (neo)shaman's office. The shamanic practitioner, Karen, tells me she keeps this work-space always "active," that is, the spirits are always present here. There's a candle burning, and she burned a bundle of sage earlier to clean the energy of the room. As the session begins, Karen asks Elaine to talk about the issue that brought her here today. Elaine talks about an inability to control her emotions, and a deep sadness, a feeling like deep inside she's worthless. She talks about being abandoned by her father at a young age, and how, while she's been to therapy off and on to deal with the aftermath, this sense of missing something never goes away. After she seems finished with her story, Karen tells her she's going to go on a divinatory journey to determine which treatment would best serve her. She asks Elaine to lie down but stay present as she does this. Karen reaches over to a CD player and presses play. As a recorded drum-beat softly fills the room, she dims the lights and lies down next to Elaine, with a scarf over her eyes. Nothing happens, that I can see, for about 15 minutes, and then the drum-beat changes and she stirs. The CD falls silent, Karen sits up, turns up the lights, and helps Elaine return to sitting. She tells Elaine that her father stole pieces of her soul for years, but didn't really want them, and so has hidden them away, and her spirit animal helper is going to go with her to find them, gather them up and bring them back. Karen asks her if she's willing to undergo this treatment, and Elaine nods. She asks Elaine to lie down again, stay present and in a receptive state. Karen says that this time she will journey and when she's gathered the missing soul parts, she will get up and blow them into Elaine's heart, help her to sit up, and then blow them into the top of her head. And so she dims the lights, presses play, and lies down. Again, from where I sit, nothing happens for a while, but then Karen crosses her arms over her chest, sits up, leans over Elaine, and cups her hands at Elaine's heart. She blows into her hands. And then Karen helps her sit up, kneels behind her and cups her hands on the top of Elaine's head. She blows into her hands again. The rhythm of the drum-beat changes again and stops, and Karen turns up the lights. They sit, the shaman and the client, for a few minutes in silence. It looks to me like Elaine is trying to see if she feels anything. After a bit, Karen tells her about the ages of the pieces she has brought back, and whether or not they were reluctant to return. She suggests Elaine spend time every day welcoming these parts back, and integrating them into herself. Elaine sips on a cup of water, and interrupts Karen here and there to ask some questions about what she saw. She's smiling, but it's a tentative smile. The session comes to a close, and as they get up, Karen cautions Elaine, that this healing work should bring her more

³ All quotes and paraphrases from participants in this study presented in this document come from interview transcripts or field notes unless otherwise indicated. All participant names are pseudonyms.

energy, but that if she does not make a nice home for the returned parts they may leave. She ends by telling her that if she doesn't feel settled, or right, she should call.

In modern shamanic healing sessions, the work is usually done by a practitioner for a client. It is also the case, however, that the practitioner will teach a client how to “journey,” so that the client can travel into nonordinary reality and develop relationships with any spirits that have volunteered to come and help. It is this learning and adopting of neo-shamanic techniques that can be used as a personal practice by an individual to support health and maintain well-being, that is, a balanced and whole enchanted self.

Individual practices that I either observed, participated in, or was told about included the shamanic journey, daily meditation that included working with one's own luminous, energetic, body, and fire-ceremonies. As an example, fire ceremonies are used to get rid of things no longer wanted, set intent for things to come, and to communicate with the animated universe. They can be done alone or in a group, and involve a candle or a bonfire. Participants open sacred space by shaking a rattle in the four cardinal directions (east, south, west, and north) plus heaven (up) and earth (down), to invoke the helping spirits associated with each to be present. Then (one at a time if in a group) the individual approaches the fire and blows the things he wants to get rid of or his wishes for things he wants to manifest into a piece of wood, which is then burned. Fire ceremony is also a form of prayer, as individuals express their gratitude to the spirits they work with and the animated cosmos in general and pray for the health of all things. It is often performed in concert with the moon's cycle—full moon being a good time to let go of things, and new moon a good time to set intent.

Many of the individuals in my study, both practitioners and participants in neo-shamanism, also participated in neo-shamanic drum circles. The stated purpose of these

circles was to create a space in which people could gather and practice neo-shamanism. Generally, the drum circles had a leader of sorts, someone who would drum for the group and suggest shamanic journeys to undertake. The circles I participated in all followed the same general form: once everyone had arrived and was sitting on the floor in a circle, someone would light a center candle, which was usually on a scarf or piece of cloth in the center of the circle. People would then get up, and open sacred space by beating drums or shaking rattles in sync, as they each, individually invoked the spirits to join them for the evening. After five minutes or so people would begin to sit back down and the room would fall silent. In this space of silence, people might offer an experience or comment or struggle they are having. The leader then suggests what the group might do for the evening, and the group discusses it a bit, until consensus is reached. When the intent for the first journey is set, everyone lies down, places scarves or bandanas over their eyes and the leader dims the lights and begins to drum. As in the healing session described above, nothing happens for the next ten to fifteen minutes in a physical sense. People are now traveling in nonordinary reality, and what they are doing cannot be observed by conventional means. When the leader alters the drum-beat to call everyone back and end the journey, people begin to move a bit, and eventually sit up. Most of them pull out notebooks and write for a while. After everyone's attention is back to the circle, one by one people will tell about their shamanic journey, and other group members might comment on it. They then repeat the process with a different intent. Perhaps they'll do work for each other or journey for a specific healing request. People who participated in drumming circles reported that they liked the discipline of having time set aside a couple of times a month to do this work. I was able to observe that over time, group members

would report resolution of issues and problems and a sense of better health as a result of their participation in the group.

Finally, classes and workshops about neo-shamanism are a formal engagement with the techniques and ideas of an animated, enchanted cosmos. Weekend workshops generally resembled shamanic drum circles, with the addition of formal teaching by the workshop leader. One of the classes I participated in was a combination of teaching about the neo-shamanic worldview and the transmission of a set of energetic rites, called the *Munay Ki*, designed to both heal the participants and open them to deepened shamanic ability. After receiving this series of rites myself over the course of fourteen months, and apprenticing with Steve, one of the neo-shamanic practitioners who teaches it, I was given the opportunity to assist in transmitting the rites to class participants. What follows is an excerpt from my field notes for one such class session:

Imagine, if you will, four pairs of folding chairs, the chairs facing each other within the pairs, gifter sits on chair facing the room/class, the giftee sits in the chair facing them (their back to the class). Between the stations and the class is an area set up on a piece of South American style fabric which has a vase of flowers on one side and three large candles, on the three other sides of the square. I sit in the chair all the way on the west side of the room (we are on the south wall). One after another the class members come up, self-select to a gifter, and get the rite transmitted to them. I gift to nine people total (there are 33 or so in the class and we gifters also gift each other at the end). There are no words. I sit face to face with my first giftee. I open my "inner sacred space" around both of us by taking my hands in prayer position from my heart, up above my head and then, palms out, arc down around us, imagining a luminous bubble of my energetic field. I close my eyes. With my hands on her knees I tune in to her energy and feel happy. I then turn my attention to the Healers. They are the lineage we are gifting tonight.

I think of them like this: if I were Quechua (indigenous group in Peru) and apprenticing to become a healer, I would have this ceremony performed. It would link me more deeply to my familial and cultural lineage of healers.. the bone-setters, herbalists, midwives. I would be born in their line and their accumulated knowledge would be passed to me culturally in my training, and also in my DNA. I am not Quechua. I'm a white girl in the US. I may indeed come from a line of ancestral healers, but that line's been broken. Maybe my DNA carries that knowledge, but it

has been lost to me culturally, put to death during the inquisition, burned at the stake during the witch-hunts. I don't belong to a tribe like my ancestors did. I belong to a global world. All of the world's peoples ultimately come from a lineage that included healers. Proportionately in time it's not that far away—we've only been industrialized for a few hundred years out of the hundreds of thousands we've been *Homo sapiens*. This Healer's Rite links the giftee to the universal lineage of healers: that is, all of our ancestors, our human heritage, one of the reasons we humans are here: without the healers our ancestors would not have survived.

As I sit in front of my giftee, eyes closed, and tune in to the healers I can see them with my mind's eye as a line of people that begins at the top of my head (my crown or 7th chakra) and drifts up and out to the right. They're small and they look indigenous—what glimpse I can get—it's not like looking at a picture or a movie, more like an impression. They're lined up and rather impatient, like "duh, this whole evening is about us, we've been waiting, we're ready, let's get moving!" I crack a smile and get on with it. I take my giftee's hands and place them palm up in front of me. I place my hands on my belly and wait. I don't know what for, but suddenly I know it's time and I reach out with my right hand and place my hand palm down on her open hands. I sit like that for a minute: my left hand on my belly, my right hand in hers. Again, I just know at some point it's time to move on. I move my hands to my heart. I leave my left hand on my heart and reach out to her hands with my right. I move to my forehead. Reach out. Right hand on hers. Thus prepared, she's ready for the transmission. I pick up her hands in mine, lean forward, and blow the Healers into them. I fold her hands together and place them on her heart, giving a little push towards her body to set it. Now we sit, hands in prayer position at hearts, eyes closed. I'm waiting for something. I'm not really sure what. And then it comes. They are inside her and they're having a *fiesta!* I have the impression they're a rowdy bunch and having a great time in their new home. I close my sacred space by reversing my hand movement and bringing my hands back down to heart, and then to belly, and then to base. I look at my giftee. She slowly opens her eyes and leans in to give me a hug. I whisper in her ear "they're having a party!". We grin. She gets up and moves to a candle where she will open her own sacred space and feed the seeds of this lineage with fire to germinate them. And the next giftee sits down.

I open sacred space and tune in, first to him, and then to the healers. As I place my right hand in his, while my left is on my heart, I am immediately astounded by the sense of expansive space. I feel my own torso growing tall to make space for what is my giftee's heart. As I blow the lineage into his hands I see them (get the impression that they) are walking out of me into his hands. I keep blowing until I see the last one cross over. When we are finished, I lean forward for a hug and whisper in his ear "you have so much space in your heart". As he gets up to go to the fire a woman sits down in the chair. This time I feel a lot of something—I don't know what—when I go from belly to hands. And when I go from forehead to hands my left hand starts to shudder uncontrollably on my forehead. I wait it out. I don't know what it is but it is strong. After what is probably only 20 seconds or so it slowly stops. When I blow the Healers into her hands I just know she has a vision for healing. I tell her this

before she goes to the fire. And another woman sits down. I've never met her before so I ask her her name. When I tune in to her I see grey. Like she's encased in a grey suit of foam. When I tune in to the healers I see them carrying bundles. When it's time to blow the lineage into her hands I hear the healers say: "blow hard". Do I actually hear it? No. It appears a fully formed sentence as if written across the back of my head or my mind. Almost as if I see it. I just know it. So I blow hard. As I sit with her I can see they are having a hard time getting in through the grey foam. As I watch, one of them finds a vertical slit in the foam and manages to get it open enough for them to squeeze in one by one with their bundles. I wait until they are all in, and before they close up the slit they tell me it's going to be work to germinate this seed and that she should do a fire ceremony every day this week. What can I do? While I hug her I tell her to do a fire ceremony every day. And the next giftee sits down. Right away I sense flowers. She's full of flowers. She's fragile. As I place my hands from belly, heart, and forehead to her hands I see the delicate and beautiful violet. The Healers tell me to be gentle: blow as gently as I can as long as I can. So I do. As they walk across to her I see them carrying bundles again. When we are finished I tell her about the violets and tears come to her eyes while at the same time she breaks into a grin.

With each person that sits in front of me I am more and more in awe of what I am so privileged to be part of. Each person is different. The Healers have something specific for each person. As I get close to my last giftee for the evening I realize that the Healers carry bundles with them when they are entering the giftee to do healing work on them. It's a beautiful image. Each person is presented to me as love and beauty. I gift to a big burly man, and as I tune in to him I sense boundless soft love that he cannot fully recognize because he is impatient with his human self. As I blow the lineage into his hands I see what a beautiful human being he is. When I hug him I whisper "take your time" into his ear. My last giftee sits down. The Healers are telling me almost before we begin that this goes in as refreshment for her. As I blow into her hands I see a big beautiful glass of water and can almost feel how good it will feel when it soaks in. But she won't take it. It just sits there. Water in a glass. The Healers grow impatient and together we knock it over. I watch as the water spreads through her whole body, refreshing every nook and cranny. No one else comes to my chair.

These examples give a word-picture, a sense of what participating in neo-shamanism can be like. Much of what happens takes place outside of ordinary reality, in a state of "ecstasy" in an extra-material realm not accessible via ordinary means. Experiential participation, like that described above, gives the researcher a unique perspective on the practice of modern shamanism, and will be discussed below, in the Methods chapter.

Anthropology and (Neo)Shamanism

Anthropology has a long and ambivalent relationship with shamanism. As early anthropologists entered the field and recognized, named, and reported the activities of tribal healers, mystics, and spiritual experts the term “shaman,” co-opted from the Tungus *saman*, was exploded to become a categorical term referring to native or traditional spiritual healers who worked in the unseen realm (Eliade 1964; Guerrier 2000; Narby 1998). The “shaman” came to occupy a place both demonic and noble in “authentic” human culture, and it is against this particular view of the “primitive” that anthropology could define itself as modern (Guerrier 2000; Sahlins 1993).

The term shamanism today invokes a particular picture of traits thought to be universal to what is generally understood to be shamanism:

...A special connection to a spirit world; a particular knowing of the medicines of the region; an ability to heal; and a particular and differentiated role within their community ...An image of the shaman inhabits the popular consciousness as a sign of the perceived mystical and mysterious nature of Aboriginal cultures. (Guerrier 2000:131)

Over the past three decades this image of the shaman has emerged in modern Western culture as central to the New Age quest for authentic and direct spiritual experience. The origin of the modern application of shamanism is generally traced to the works of two controversial anthropologists: Carlos Castaneda and Michael Harner. Castaneda’s highly popular book, *The Teachings of Don Juan, a Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, published in 1968, is credited with creating a public interest in Native spirituality. This was followed in 1980 with Harner’s *The Way of the Shaman*, a “how to” manual of shamanic techniques, distilled to an acultural version of shamanism he calls *core-shamanism*, which is “basically a strategy for personal learning and acting on that learning” (Harner

1980: xxiv). As shamanic traditions are transformed into New Age techniques for healing, little attention has been paid to this modern cultural phenomenon in the anthropological literature. Atkinson (1992) suggests that this is rooted in the anthropological familiarity with romantic tropes. The academe may feel that they are deeply implicated as key sources for the development of neo-shamanism, and that as shamanism becomes popularized they may feel threatened by nonscholarly access to what was once their own (Atkinson 1992). Anthropology's silence on the topic is notable. Atkinson's 1992 article is the only anthropological review, and devotes only a postscript to neo-shamanism.

Traditional shamanism across cultures is diverse and dynamic, but holds some basic similarities. Eliade (1964) describes the shaman as "the great master of ecstasy" (4). He or she is a part-time specialist who functions as an intermediary between the material and spiritual worlds, employing an altered state of consciousness to contact an extra-material reality in order to solve problems and heal illness for individuals and the community. The status of the shaman, the techniques used, the means for altering one's consciousness, and the problems addressed vary with political, social, economic, and environmental context.

Modern shamanism is also diverse. The modern shaman may be a full- or part-time healing practitioner, or may be an individual who utilizes the tools of neo-shamanism for personal use. Two key differences between traditional and modern shamanism are that modern shamanism is focused on the individual rather than the community, and that individuals can learn neo-shamanic tools and techniques solely for personal use, not in service to others. Another general difference is that traditional

shamanism generally requires no active participation from the patient, while modern shamanism does. But this is not always the case. For example, Glass-Coffin (1998) details how the *curanderas* (female shamans) she worked with in Peru involve their patients in the all night curing ritual of the *mesa*, giving them the sacred cactus, *San Pedro*, as part of the process of healing. Similarly, Katz (1982) describes how the !Kung trance (shamanic journey) is available to all who choose to undertake the training, and how the entire community participates in the all night healing dances by singing, drumming, and/or trancing. While these two examples demonstrate that patients in traditional shamanic healing cultures may be expected to take an active role in the altered state of consciousness of shamanism, in the main, they do not. In contrast, modern shamanism operates on the !Kung model with one key difference: anyone who is interested may undertake the process of learning how to control an altered state of consciousness in order to work in the shamanic realm, but for the most part, this is undertaken as an individual health-maintenance and spiritual activity, not a healing practice for others.

Townsend (2006) proposes two general categories of modern shamanism. The first is *neo-shamanism*:

an eclectic collection of beliefs and activities drawn from literature, workshops, and the internet. [They are an] invented tradition of practices and beliefs based on a constructed metaphorical, romanticized 'ideal' shaman concept which often differs considerably from traditional shamans. (15)

The second is *core shamanism*, characterized as being based on a

limited number of core features which underlie all shamanism ... an experiential method by which one uses drumming to move into Spirit Reality, contact spirits, and gain assistance from them. (15)

I take issue with Townsend's implicit judgment of core shamanism as more authentic than neo-shamanism. Core shamanism is also an invented tradition, resting also on romanticized ideas about traditional shamanism. For instance, Harner downplays to the point of denial the presence of malevolent or dangerous beings in nonordinary reality (Harner 1980; field notes). I have found the key difference between neo- and core shamanism to be that neo-shamanism usually, although often loosely, claims a specific cultural lineage or tradition, while core shamanism does not. For example, the Dance of the Deer Foundation claims a direct lineage to the Huichol of Northern Mexico through its founder, Brandt Secunda, who is the grandson of a Huichol shaman. The Four Winds Society claims to be based on Peruvian and Inkan [sic] shamanism, and was founded by Alberto Villoldo, a Cuban-American. In contrast, Harner's Foundation for Shamanic Studies claims no cultural lineage. His created core shamanism is based on what he considers to be universal features that underlie all shamanic systems and are thus free of the trappings of specific cultures. In sum, modern shamanism (neo- and core) generally differs considerably from and idealizes and romanticizes traditional shamanism. I will use *neo-shamanism* as a general term to refer to the modern use of shamanic techniques and *core shamanism* to refer specifically to the Harner method.

Neo-Shamanism in the Anthropological Literature: A Review of the Literature

Ethnographies

Relatively little has been written about neo-shamanism in the US within anthropology, aside from criticisms of cultural theft. Wallis (2000) states that "neo-shamanism is ignored because it is thought to be harmless or irrelevant or downplayed

because it is eccentric, fringe and laughable, of not interest to serious scholarship” (260). Indeed, there are only a handful of ethnographies about the modern application of shamanism in contemporary society, and they address neo-shamanism in Northern Europe as researched by Northern European scholars.

Lindquist’s (1997) book *Shamanic Performances on the Urban Scene: Neo-Shamanism in Contemporary Sweden* is the result of her study of core shamanism in Sweden, as taught by a student of Harner’s Foundation for Shamanic Studies. She examines how neo-shamanism is created using performance and play. Participants in the workshops she attended are in the most part strangers to each other, yet they share an intense weekend of experiences. She suggests that this shared experience is the ontological authority in neo-shamanism, and that culture is created out of raw experience through “rapid socialization.” Lindquist situates the neo-shamanism of her study in the larger context of modernity and the New Age and concludes her book with the idea that neo-shamanistic culture serves to *re-enchant* its participants’ “world of dreary work and material consumption, the disenchanting world of modernity envisaged by Weber” (298).

Lindquist’s ethnography was followed in 1999 by Jakobsen’s study of core shamanism in Denmark and England as it compares to traditional Greenlandic shamanism, entitled *Shamanism: Traditional and Contemporary Approaches to the Mastery of Spirits and Healing*. Jakobsen notes two key distinctions between traditional and neo-shamanism. One rests on the relationship between the shaman and the spirits. The traditional Greenlandic shaman was mediator and master of spirits while the neo-shaman is “recipient of help, power, and knowledge...the helping spirits are mostly instant helpers, the seeker a recipient not a master” (9). The other concerns the nature of

the spirit realm. While the spirits in the cosmology of the traditional Greenlandic shaman are at best neutral, and at worst dangerous, those in the cosmology of core shamanism are benevolent, compassionate, and readily available to assist humans. She notes, however, that both traditional and modern shamans use their abilities and contact with spirits of nonordinary reality to cope with the impotence of the human condition. In traditional Greenlandic culture, shamanism is a means of coping with the vagaries of nature, while in the case of the Westerner neo-shamanism is a means of coping in a fragmented society. Jakobsen states that her informants expressed a desire for self-transformation and healing in response to a feeling of “deprivation of values” and a void not filled by the institutions available to them in mainstream society. Assumed, but not examined, in Jakobsen’s book, is a sense of isolation and estrangement inherent in modernity, which can be answered by a renewed contact with the sacred—the disenchantment and re-enchantment Lindquist mentions at the end of her book.

A more recent ethnography about neo-shamanism is Blain’s (2002) *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic: Ecstasy and Neo-Shamanism in North European Paganism*. Blain begins her book by introducing herself as both researcher and neo-shamanic practitioner. It is from this experiential perspective that she examines neo-shamanism, both core and culture-specific (the modern practice of Seiðr in Sweden), in light of traditional Icelandic shamanism (Seiðr) as presented in the sagas of Erik the Red. Her central foci include how ancient texts are transformed to meaningful modern use, and how such use is an “active accomplishment of meaning,” a phrase she coins to avoid the implied judgment of “real” vs. “fake.” Blain (2002) addresses the issue of authenticity, a troubling concern in the academe:

Narratives of ‘the spirits’ and of the shaman as entering into socially constitutive relations with them, however, are what become most problematic for a Western rationalist audience, for whom non-belief in ‘spirits’ is axiomatic. I have seen a conference returning, time after time, to the question of ‘do the spirits exist?’ In presenting any material that relates to personal experience, I have to deal with the challenge of whether I have ‘belief’ in ‘the spirits’: a belief that would seem to discredit my credentials to do ‘impartial’ or ‘unbiased’ ethnography. (That non-belief also constitutes ‘bias’ would be seen as likewise irrational by adherents of the non-belief discourse.) (155-156)

She problematizes the study of neo-shamanism, grappling with how to examine the inner world of other people. One can try to get there through people’s words about those experiences or one can use self-experience, participating experientially “as if” the non-ordinary realm were real.⁴

Blain’s ethnography raises questions salient to the issues addressed in Lindquist and Jakobsen: especially that of how to study neo-shamanism. Her situated stance as both practitioner and researcher gives her unique insight to the problems of understanding the experience of others, whether her own experience is or is not representative, and how the emic is represented in the anthropological literature. She questions the very idea of “belief” stating that for participants in neo-shamanisms, spirit-beings are simply *there*.

Wallis (2003) follows Blain, skeptical of the conventional position of the anthropologist as participative yet objective observer in his book *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies and Contemporary Pagans*. He critiques the logical positivist situated standpoint, questioning the objectivity of science, and calls for an experiential engagement in the study of modern shamanism –that is, he says to study modern mystery religions one must take part, especially in neo-shamanism which, for the

⁴ A recent work by Glass-Coffin (in press) takes experiential engagement (which she calls “radical participation”) a step further and drops the “as if” stating that maintaining the separation between the anthropologist and the subject of research “simply does not serve” when the anthropologist has directly experienced nonordinary reality and been transformed by it.

most part, cannot be observed in the material sense.

Neo-Colonialism: Stealing Native Spirituality

In the majority, the literature concerning neo-shamanism in the US is not ethnographic in nature, but a criticism of neo-shamans for stealing and selling Native Spirituality. It hinges on two key points: 1) it is just one more theft in a 500 year tradition of Whites stealing from Native Americans; and 2) it is damaging to Native people: for example Lyons of the Onondaga Nation says that real Indians are no longer “Indian enough” due to all the “preposterous” stuff out there (Churchill 2003). This attention to cultural theft raises important issues about the role and the voice of anthropology in social issues surrounding native and indigenous peoples, the neo-colonialist role neo-shamanism may play in perpetuating the poverty and dispossession of the very people whose spiritual lives they admire, and the dearth of descriptive literature about the modern phenomenon of neo-shamanism.

Aldred (2000), one of the few anthropologists who writes on this topic, accuses New Agers of consuming a bastardized version of the idealized Indian, a form of imperialist nostalgia fueled by embedded guilt. Donaldson (1999), not an anthropologist, states that Native Spirituality is fetishized. That is, following Appadurai, Whites are creating imagined histories and that the imagined nostalgia of Native Spirituality evokes the “Noble Savage” living in “perfect harmony” with their environment. The result is a complex system of symbols reduced it to a flat, generalized commodity appropriate for everyone (692). Hobson (2002), also not an anthropologist, argues for a re-assertion of the complexity of character of Native Americans—they are not only their rituals, their

feathers and sage, the items which have been appropriated by the surrounding White culture, but they are lawyers, tribal judges, soccer-moms, stomp dancers, urban, rural, and so forth. Donaldson (1999) states that it is the act of consumption that links the imagined nostalgia to the commodity and that this is a postmodern neo-colonialism. After all, marketing in modern consumer culture is all the same, whether for material goods or for spirituality—“buy this and change your life” (Aldred 2000).

Kehoe (2000) addresses this in her critical (if brief) examination of neo-shamanism. Her characterization of neo-shamanism is harsh: “Its ‘shamanic journeying’ is a trip to a great Nonordinary Mall filled with spirits as eager as salesclerks to assist all comers” (87). Yet her point is salient: traditional shamanism is *transformed* to fit the modern context of a fast-paced, commodity-driven society. Inherent in this transformation is a neo-colonialist current, which, with its focus on the individual as means for planetary healing, tends to deflect any real strategies to shift the nature of production to sustainable means and reduce consumer waste.

Von Stuckrad (2002) offers a thoughtful counterpoint to at least some of these criticisms, by tracing the origins of some key New Age elements, specifically neo-shamanism, directly from the nineteenth century romantic tradition of *Naturphilosophie*. He argues that people of European descent have a long tradition of counter-reaction to the materialism of modernity in which humans have a compassionate empathy for an animated natural world. Thus the cooption of elements of Native Spirituality as part of neo-shamanic practices is a rather late addition to a two-century Western thought tradition. This does not, however, preclude the fact that the inclusion of Native spiritual elements into neo-shamanic practices may be damaging to Native peoples (Churchill

2003). Beside the obvious violence done to Native people by continued stealing from them, this specific form of theft by New Agers is particularly damaging because it deflects attention away from the plight of the Native community. New Agers consume Native Spirituality for self-transformation and as a means of effecting social, environmental, and even planetary transformation, but this tends not to include social and political activism addressing the rampant poverty and other problems plaguing Natives today, a plague begun 500 years ago (Churchill 1998; Locke 1995; Whitt 1995). Lau (2000) suggests that consumption of the New Age replaces political action. This is echoed in criticism that has been laid on the New Age health movement in general (Baer 2003).

Anthropology's notable silence on this subject may stem from the uncomfortable nature of the criticism—for they, too, are guilty of profiting from Native peoples. Anthropology is held to blame for the same sort of violence against Native peoples in the following way: because discourse produces the world about which it speaks, “shamanism” can be considered an ethnographic creation, and the traditional (created) shaman holds a place both demonic and noble in the anthropological literature—images which have been both exoticized and legitimized by anthropological research (Glass-Coffin 2003). It is against this demonic yet noble Other, recall, that anthropology could appear modern—thus, anthropology's long tradition of ambivalence regarding things shamanic (Guerrier 2000). This also applies to neo-shamanism. At least two well-known neo-shamans in the US ally themselves with anthropology: Michael Harner, who bases his understanding of traditional healing on his anthropological fieldwork, but left the academe to promote his version of neo-shamanism in the late 1970s, and Alberto

Villoldo, the founder of the Four Winds Society and a self-styled Castaneda figure (see Villoldo & Jendresen 1990), who is trained as a clinical psychologist but refers to himself as a medical anthropologist. Guerrier (2000) calls Harner's creation of the "authentic indigenous shaman" a "simulation of dominance" (138). To deny some of the colonial power inherent in their privileged position, Guerrier (2000) states that anthropologists must be explicit about their situated standpoint.

Transparency concerning an anthropologist's situated standpoint is, however, not value-free. Recall that Blain (2002) asserts that belief and nonbelief are not given equal standing as platforms for bias. The anthropologist who is explicit about his nonbelief will be taken to be a "good" anthropologist, maintaining appropriate objectivity and not being duped by the beliefs of others. In contrast, the anthropologist who claims belief is immediately suspect, for science (nonbelief) begets facts—objective facts—while religion begets belief—subjective, nonverifiable, belief. Researchers should go beyond being explicit about their situated standpoint, and should examine how their worldview interacts with, impacts, and colors the very nature of the research and its representation—whether "believer" or not.

The Roots of Neo-Shamanism

An intriguing yet neglected area of anthropological inquiry into neo-shamanism has to do with the roots of this phenomenon, and how the commodification of spirituality is part and parcel of the cultural milieu of the late-capitalist era (Lau 2000). Once again, anthropology is noticeable in its silence about this. This might stem from the only fairly recent turning of our gaze upon ourselves, and the lingering stigma of studying at home.

It is an age-old *rite de passage* for the anthropologist to go into the field and live among exotic peoples, bringing back unbelievable stories of difference, exciting material artifacts, and a nasty disease or two. The New Age is a domestic phenomenon and thus the silence is, at least in part, rooted in the reluctance to take something so close to home seriously (Wallis 2000).

Lau (2000) demonstrates how the marketing of spirit and health fit into our late capitalist culture as practice is transformed into product in response to *risk society*—a concept of modernity theorized by Ulrich Beck (1993). She accounts for the popularity and commodification of spirituality in the New Age as an imagined nostalgia, oft represented by the romanticized Native past:

...the successes of the modernizing process have been so great as to have introduced unanticipated risks in the form of side effects to the techno-industrial processes that sustain modernity. ...Consequently, social responses to risk society—and to modernity—circle back to an imagined past existing prior to industrialization, a past epitomized by references to more integrated relationships with nature and the interconnectedness of all living things... (Lau 2000:9)

A recent dissertation by sociologist Sutler-Cohen (2005) echoes this theme. She cites a modern void and desire to reduce uncertainty, and suggests that Native Spirituality, in the form of core and neo-shamanism fills this void. Because it is for sale at weekend workshops it is accessible to anyone with the means to pay the fee.

Few scholars writing about neo-shamanism seriously consider the roots of the oft-cited modernity-induced void—that is, that modernity excludes the sacred. Von Stuckrad (2002) states that while modernity entails the increasing separation of sacred and material realms, it is an ongoing and not uncontested process. Thus, modernity is really a dialectic between rational materiality and mystic experiences. In other words, modern quests for mystic experiences are grounded in the very roots of modernity:

...the shaman became an indication of a new understanding of humanity's relation to nature, of man's ability to access spiritual levels of reality, and of leading a respectful life toward the 'sacred web of creation.' Henceforth, shamanism was no longer regarded as a spiritual path limited only to 'classical shamanic cultures.' Instead, by substituting the western positivistic and mechanistic attitude toward reality and nature with a holistic or vitalist one, shamanism was considered available to everyone—even to those in urban contexts that are estranged from nature. (von Stuckrad 2002: 774)

In this view, neo-shamanism can be understood as a way to re-enchant the experience of nature. Along these lines, Taylor et al. (2002) point out that alternative spirituality (of which neo-shamanism is one example) has a tradition in the US and is as old as the colonies, citing the Ephratites, the Shakers, homeopaths, and mesmerists to mention a few.

Here we have a position from which neo-shamanism can be considered, not as a bastardization of some idealized form of traditional shamanism, but as a cultural phenomenon in its own right, one aspect of a larger cultural flow, counter-reaction to the disenchantment that comes with modernity. This is a key element of this thesis: neo-shamanism is a contemporary cultural phenomenon in which traditional shamanic techniques and ideas are transformed into a constellation of techniques, practices, and beliefs about the nature of illness and the best way to heal it. It is a re-working of traditional shamanism in a *modern* context, for *modern* individuals.

An Ethnographic Study of Modern Shamanism in the US: Enchanted Healing in a Disenchanted World

There is a disjunction between a fundamental human ontological need and the character of modern institutions. Modernity's emphasis on the external, material, and measurable, creates a disenchanted cosmology in which ontology is unavailable, for *meaning*—the deep nature of being—cannot be answered by scientific means (Berman

1981; Howe 2006; Wilber 1998). Neo-shamanism is well suited to address modern problems because it is a process by which the physical and spiritual are merged and a moral layer to the physical world is reclaimed –providing ontology (Harner 1980; Lindquist 1997; Villoldo 2000; von Stuckrad 2002). Thus, neo-shamanism’s underlying premise is that we live in an enchanted world, rich with an unseen, extra-material, spiritual, energetic reality, alongside and in addition to the material world. Neo-shamanic techniques allow the individual to engage with the extra-material world in order to provide healing for self, others, society, and the planet (see, for example: Doore 1988; Harner 1980; Narby 1998; Villoldo 2000). However, while a counter-reaction to modernity, neo-shamanism is a modern phenomenon, undertaken by modern, *detraditionalized*⁵ individuals. Neo-shamanism allows for the detraditionalized self and even radicalizes it (Heelas 1996).

Participants in neo-shamanism represent a variety of motivations for engagement; from a deep spiritual calling to curiosity; from dissatisfaction with the modern world to interest in a practice that fits with modernity’s core values. One of those core values is an empiricist engagement with the world. Harner (1980) suggests that the shamanic journey (the experience of the individual in an altered state with the intent to engage with the non-ordinary shamanic realms) is empirical evidence. It is an experiential, rather than observable, empiricism. Neo-shamanism thus allows individuals to experience, explore, collect, and consider empirical evidence by traveling to those realms not conducive to

⁵ Recall, as discussed in Chapter I, that Heelas (1996) suggests that the modern individual is *detraditionalized*: i.e., seeks autonomous self-cultivation, aspires to ground identity within, and desires to exercise independence, authority, choice, and expressivity (Heelas 1996). This modern sense of self does not *belong to* an overarching system but is *informed by* it.

study through scientific means. In this way individuals can explore the deep nature of being, using a broad empiricism, i.e., not limited to data evident in the material world (Harner 1980; Wilber 1998).

Just who makes up the population of those who engage in modern shamanism and how large that population happens to be is unknown. Hagerty (2009) reports that at least 50% of people in the US have had a spiritual experience that tends towards the mystic. According to my research, the vast majority of individuals who engage in neo-shamanic practice and/or healing have mystical spiritual experiences. Furthermore, it is likely that individuals who engage in neo-shamanism are drawn from the approximately 12% of the US population Ray and Anderson (2000) label “Core Creatives.” These are individuals concerned with living an authentic life, learning through an intimate engagement with “rich, visceral, sensory stuff of life” and direct, personal experience (22). They have a well-developed social conscience, an interest in self-actualization and spirituality, and are likely to utilize alternative medicines. Women are over-represented in this group and people in it tend to be more educated than average (Ray & Anderson 2000: 14), but they are otherwise demographically heterogeneous, representing a wide range of incomes, ages, and occupations.

Accordingly, neo-shamanic participants should be expected to fall into the three categories proposed by Heelas (1996) about New Age participants in general—the *fully engaged*, *serious part-timers*, and *casual part-timers*. The *fully engaged* is the individual who devotes his or her life to the spiritual quest. This individual may be a healer; run shamanic workshops; practice austere, challenging, and time-consuming practices; live a spiritually-informed counter-culture life; or live a “normal” life but “live and breathe”

their spirituality. In other words, they live in an (re)enchanted cosmology. Most, if not all, neo-shamanic practitioners who maintain healing practices and teach workshops should fit into this group. The *serious part-timer* is one who has a conventional career, but participates in workshops and courses on a part-time basis. These individuals take their engagement in neo-shamanism seriously and their cosmology is in the process of being re-enchanted, but with some tension between the neo-shamanic and modern cosmologies. Their spirituality takes place alongside their other ways of living, and they may turn to neo-shamanism for healing, for help through a midlife or other crisis, or because they are seeking spirituality and authenticity. This category likely includes individuals who use neo-shamanic techniques for themselves but do not consider themselves neo-shamanic healers. They are the clients of neo-shamans and workshop attendees. The *casual part-timer* is one motivated by curiosity or to satisfy a consumerist outlook. These individuals are sensation seekers, see neo-shamanism as a consumer activity, and are interested in the esoteric, nostalgic, weird and unexpected, buying the books and paraphernalia around the phenomenon. It is this group that could likely be expected to dabble in a variety of New Age practices, while still fully entrenched in mainstream (disenchanted) culture.

Additionally, many individuals are attracted to neo-shamanism because of dissatisfaction with biomedical and conventional psychotherapy treatment of chronic and difficult to diagnose conditions such as low back pain, depression, and chronic fatigue syndrome. In their study of the utilization of alternative medicine, Eisenberg and colleagues (1998) did not examine if and how biomedicine failed for the individuals who seek out alternative therapy, however, one might expect that it does fail in some way for

alternatives to be such big business in the US.

The modern use of shamanism as a healing system stands in at least partial conflict with the biomedical model, for while the presence and absence of symptoms may be observable and based in physical, ordinary reality, the origin and treatment of those symptoms may not. If the cosmology of the neo-shaman is indeed enchanted, modern shamanic diagnosis and treatment yield a different, broad sort of empirical evidence. In this way, neo-shamanism is a method of healing which may, somewhat counter-intuitively, *fit* with a Western modernity, which privileges empiricism and materiality, while at the same time offer an alternative to the modern emphasis on the observable, measurable, physical reality.

This points to a larger issue for the individuals who engage in neo-shamanic healing, resting on the question: How do individuals, who are complex and multi-faceted (holistic), understand and address their health needs in a medical system that, while complex, is reductionistic in nature? One approach in medical anthropology, a meaning-centered frame, is to “unpack” health, medicine, and the illness experience as a “set of systems for creating, experiencing, and communicating meaning in life” (Singer & Baer 2007: 33). That is, how do participants approach meaning through their engagement in neo-shamanism as a healing modality?

However, this issue can also be approached from a critical frame, following Kleinman’s (1995) assessment that biomedicine’s “radically reductionistic value orientation is ultimately dehumanizing” (31) and that the “very idea of a moral purpose to the illness experience is a biomedical impossibility” (32). This critical approach seeks to understand the origins of dominant cultural constructions in health, thus, in this

theoretical frame, the deficiencies of biomedicine, written into its most basic assumptions, structure health and medicine in such a way that not only fails to address the larger context of individuals' health and illness experiences, but erects a barrier between people and the healing they seek.

It is the intersection of these approaches, where agency meets structure and people are affected by their experiences, that holds interest in the examination of neo-shamanism, enchantment, and healing, for

... people develop their own individual and collective understandings and responses to illness and to other threats to their well-being, but they do so in a world that is not of their own making. (Singer & Baer 2007: 34)

This research project, in examining issues of enchantment, healing, modernity, and modern shamanism, draws upon both Meaning-Centered and Critical approaches in

Medical Anthropology in an effort to characterize neo-shamanism as a healing system:

A starting premise of medical anthropology is that health-related issues, including disease and treatment, are far more than narrow biological phenomenon. How we get sick, why we get sick, and what sickness means to us are all heavily determined by cultural and social factors as well. The same can be said about what makes us get better and how diseases are understood and handled by health care providers (Singer & Baer 2007: 1)

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Studying Neo-Shamanism

I came to the topic of the modern use of shamanism in contemporary society in the same way that most people come to neo-shamanism –I needed healing. People seek out neo-shamanism for relief from emotional, psychological, relational, spiritual and, as in my case, physical issues and crises. For a period of nine months in 2003 I suffered severe sacral-ileac (lower back) pain. The condition varied from a debilitating pain which prevented me from rolling myself over in bed, to an irritating burning path down the outside of my right thigh and the inability to walk normally. I was in chronic pain, but determined not to seek care in a biomedical setting because I did not want to take muscle relaxants. Being sensitive to medications, I do not take them often, and as I was in the second year of my doctoral program, I was concerned that medications would cloud my thinking and impact my studies negatively. In an effort to regain mobility and decrease the constant pain, I visited a chiropractor regularly, received therapeutic massage, and took a Pilates class and then yoga. Each of these helped in some fashion, but nothing seemed to last, and I kept finding myself at the severe end of things, unable to walk without crutches and excruciating pain.

It was early Autumn 2003 when a friend and trusted advisor suggested I go see a friend of his who was “learning to be a shaman,” and needed to practice on 12 people. It was free –a very attractive price for a graduate student with inadequate health insurance. “It could make for a fascinating dissertation topic” he said, “And who knows? Maybe it will help your back.” I made the call, and on November 6, 2003, I went to see this aspiring fledgling of a shaman. He was middle-aged, mid to late forties maybe. And white. Very, very white. Definitely not indigenous, or Native, or from anything that would resemble the type of culture you’d expect a shaman to come from. And he was openly honest with me: “I don’t know if I can help your back or not.”

The fledgling-shaman, I’ll call him Steve, had me lie down on a massage table, and then asked me to call up the feelings associated with my back condition and blow them into a rock I had chosen from a group of rocks he had laid out on a piece of woven cloth. After I did so, he spent what felt like a long time alternating between holding the occipital bone at the base of my skull and moving his hand in spirals over my belly, punctuated by a motion that made it look like he was flinging something off his hand. When he was finished, he helped me sit up, gave me some water, and told me what he had done: an “illumination of my third chakra.” Steve explained that this was part of a healing system he was learning that was loosely based on a tradition of healing found in the indigenous groups of Peru, brought to contemporary society by a man named Alberto Villoldo through his school, the Four Winds Society. I could barely listen. My mind was crowded with the images I had experienced while he had worked on me. As Steve continued to talk, however, I realized he was describing the same images that I had “seen” during the session. That caught my attention. After all, had that not happened

inside my head? How could he see something inside my head? Or could he? Where did those images reside? Were they my imagination, akin to the dreams I have during sleep? Or were they external to me, happening in some other dimension that was accessible not only to me, but to him, and perhaps others?

The appointment was finished. Steve helped me hobble off the table—the session had not immediately and magically fixed my back—and gave me some homework to do. He called it the “Death Arrow.” I was instructed to imbue a stick with the issue of my back and my fears surrounding it and then burn or bury it.

And so I returned home, did my homework, and went about my business as best I could with the chronic pain that was my back. I had a lot to mull over. Here was a not Native, not indigenous man who had a regular day job, who was learning to heal people through some sort of traditional healing system that had been stretched and changed and made into something that was selling in the US. It really was beginning to sound like a pretty neat dissertation. And I had had those interesting visions during the session, images that he could see. He had helped me identify just how scared I was at the powerless way I felt about my whole life because my back did not work right. The mind-boggling thing was, though, that three days after that healing session, I woke up astonished by the absence of pain. It had worked.

I had been healed of my chronic condition and I had a topic for my dissertation. So I set out to study this new use of shamanism in modern society. I had a lot of questions: Who was doing this? Why? Where did it come from? Does it always work? I settled on: How does neo-shamanism function as a healing system in the US? That became my broad topic.

Experiential Anthropology

Fieldwork, which applies the methodology of participant-observation, is what sets anthropology apart from the other social sciences. Scientists have long been going into the field to learn about human cultures, but Bronislaw Malinowski is credited with making fieldwork the hallmark of anthropology. Whether he intended to or not, he formalized the idea that in order to really make sense of how a group of people functions in the world one must go to the people, learn and speak their language, live among them participating in the tasks of daily life, and stay there for a long time. His combination of participating in the daily life of the group while at the same time observing and recording his observations is called *participant-observation*. By observing, the anthropologist maintains a distant and detached view of the society, i.e., is objective. This is the *etic* point of view. By participating, the anthropologist gets a subjective point of view; he or she seeks an *emic* experience of what it is like to live life as a member of that particular group. It is this combination that is the genius of anthropology: a dance between the *etic* and the *emic*, an investigation based on one's own, outside categories but informed by the insider's perspective.

This form of research is not without its difficulties. It is no easy task to be both an objective outsider and a subjective insider at the same time. When anthropology was young, however, and the difference between researcher and subject was vast, the line between the *etic* and the *emic* was clear. It becomes blurred when studying "at home." No longer is it obvious where the research begins and ends, and the distinction between being in and out of the field dissolves. The research imperative shifts from taking care to not dismiss undecipherable aspects of Other culture because they do not make sense from

a modern point of view, to being diligent about not taking for granted the background of Own culture. The anthropologist who studies at home must strive to make visible the obvious: the etic and the emic begin to look alike, and the researcher is in danger of not being able to retain both perspectives discreetly as Norman, a participant in my study who himself had done anthropological research as a graduate student, argues:

Worldview turns out to be critically important. It's like the color of the glasses we wear when we see the world. And what you, as an anthropologist studying modern shamanism, are trying to do now is incredibly difficult. You can see the world as a shaman, and you can see the world as an academic, but you have to choose eventually. There's no way to blend the two. If you blend the two you really don't see what either group is seeing. It's a dilemma for people who are out on the edge. (Norman, neo-shamanic participant)

Another challenging aspect of anthropological fieldwork is the sometimes thin line between striving for an emic perspective and "going native." Going native is when the anthropologist loses him- or herself in the culture of study, discarding the etic. It is at this point that the researcher is said to lose objectivity and the research its academic credibility. Yet, how does the anthropologist studying at home avoid going native when he or she is already native? I would argue that the line between "us" and "them" gets moved to the ephemeral in own-culture research. Already native, the easy markers of skin color, language, clothing, food preferences, and such, are likely missing and the anthropologist has to uncover just what it is that separates him or her from a particular subject of study and its participants. This is not a simple task, but one that evokes the complexity of modern life. And it adds to the transformative aspect of anthropological fieldwork. An anthropologist seeking to see her own culture through a different etic view will undoubtedly have to take a different perspective of her self as well. It is a messy job, studying human culture. Personality, mood, and appearances are tied up in the

relationship between observer and observed, participant and group. When studying culture at home, the anthropologist can and should expect to have her assumptions about how her own society works shaken up. Precisely because the anthropologist dances with both the etic and the emic, she is impacted, changed, and challenged. It seems impossible to be unaffected by extended fieldwork.

These issues are amplified in the study of contemporary spiritual healing practices in the US, such as neo-shamanism, by a US researcher. Not only are the lines between researcher and researched blurred, but the very categories we use to explain the world are up for grabs. Anthropology was birthed by a handful of natural scientists at the end of the 19th century and is embedded in the Western scientific tradition of observing, measuring, and categorizing the material world. The history of anthropology is an effort to make material the immaterial aspects of human culture such as values, preferences, and motivations. To do this the anthropologist relies on what people say about what they do and what they think coupled with what she can observe. But how should she go about studying the extra-material world? She has no referent for the experiences being described by her informants, nor can she observe them.

At issue is a disagreement over how engaged the anthropologist must be when studying the spiritual life of a people. Take, for instance, the fact that some anthropologists have encountered unexplainable (by scientific or Western means) phenomena in the field, such as Edith Turner's (1994; 1997) encounter with a visible spirit form in Zambia. Encounters such as Turner's are admitted only with reluctance and rarely make it into the literature, for fear of loss of credibility and accusations of "going native" (Blain 2002). The distanced and objective stance of the anthropologist engaged in

classic participant-observation does not account for the experience of spiritual phenomena in the field. Because of this, some anthropologists, such as Lindquist (1997), Blain (2002), and Wallis (2000; 2003), call for experiential engagement with the cosmology of the study population as if it were real—an experiential anthropology.

Favret-Saada (1980) provides an early example of engaging with the spiritual world of research participants experientially. The only way in which she could study witchcraft among the Bocage in rural France was to either be a witch or be a victim of one. If she did not occupy one of these two positions the existence of witchcraft was flatly denied by her study population. Thus she had to be engaged, literally so, in witchcraft, i.e., she had to participate experientially. She is, however, an exception to the field's reluctance to admit such engagement. Marton (1994) traces the silence concerning such experiences to the legacy of the Castaneda books—in the wake of the controversy surrounding the questionable validity of Castaneda's work, anthropologists were wary of writing anything that evoked a Castanedian sense of nonordinary reality for fear they would be categorized as “not scientific.”

Romanucci-Ross (1980) anticipated the recent discourse on experiential anthropology with her own perspective on Castaneda's legacy, detailing how his impact on her students in the 1970s pointed to the limiting ways of seeing and writing that “classic anthropology” allows. However, she suggests that while experiential anthropology can fill the gap in data collection, there may be no place for the resulting data.

More recently, Jakobsen (2003) points to the closeness of the researcher to the researched as problematic in the study of neo-shamanism. The line between researcher

and subject fades when studying one's own culture, as the researcher may find that the subject (neo-shamanism) satisfies in themselves "the need for a holistic ecological concept of the universe" (23). In other words, the anthropologist might like the worldview of the study participants and adopt it for her own— that is, she might go native.

Not only, as Romanucci-Ross anticipated, does data generated in studying such phenomena have difficulty finding academic expression, but what counts as data becomes problematic. Bacigalupo (1999) asks: how do we be the engaged participant and detached observer at the same time? How do we make data from our dreams, hallucinations, and mistakes made during rituals? Experiential engagement with the subject results in self-as-data—the researcher participates fully, taking the stance that the experiences are real, not just a figment of the imagination, and the experience itself becomes data, to be added to the recorded observations and data collected from other participants. This is not without controversy. The practice of neo-shamanism relies heavily on interactions with an extra-material reality in an altered state of consciousness, but can an anthropologist be an observer while in that altered state of consciousness? The problem is that what an individual experiences an altered state (in nonordinary reality) cannot be directly observed by the anthropologist, and personal experiential participation may be the only way she can observe what takes place there. Blain (2002), as an example, adds her observations in nonordinary reality during her engaged participation in the *seiðr* to her data set on the assumption of her participants that the spirits exist.

... observation is not enough to understand relations between *seið*workers and the spirit world. My own experiences form part of what I analyze, and inevitably

position me within the layers of meaning that are constructed within the seiðr séance and within the communities of those who engage with it. (Blain 2002: 7)

These issues deserve thoughtful and continued consideration from the discipline as a whole, especially considering the fact that anthropological terminology and methodologies are increasingly being used by other social sciences. For example, a number of recent dissertations in the social sciences investigating neo-shamanism use “auto-ethnography” as their only methodology, i.e., experiential participation and self-as-data as the sole data source (see Alexander 2004; Erickson 2001; Karl 2005). The obvious limitation of this approach is the inability to know whether self experience is representative of the experience of others.

Wallis (2000) presents a coherent and convincing argument that experiential engagement and self-as-data are useful, and even necessary for the study of neo-shamanism. He challenges the discipline to examine its situated standpoint, recognizing that the Western researcher does not give a neutral and impartial presentation but one located in a political and social place: all researchers, whether engaged experientially or not, occupy a situated standpoint. And, he anticipates Blain (2002) in his discussion that inherent in the Western position is an authenticity concern: is what they are doing *real* or *fake*? Wallis suggests that our concern should be with the relevance of neo-shamanism in the present, not with its authenticity or lack of it. He concludes that it is disingenuous *not* to engage in this subject experientially.

Some of the reluctance to engage in the nonordinary experience evident in the academe may stem from the deep knowing that as we learn, we embody, and at some point are changed by, the data we collect (Bacigalupo 1999). It is the fear of “going native,” which becomes more complex when studying Own culture, because one is

already native. As Guerrier (2000) points out, discourse produces the world about which it speaks and, following Bourdieu, she states that because we can only “think the thinkable,” we bring our experience into the observation or the reading, and the story written may indeed reflect more about the writer than the subject. Unexamined, this reproduces a superior Western standpoint. To avoid this pitfall she suggests we “question everything” and recognize (or remember) the space between the observed and the observer, between the observed and the text. Overall, among those who consider neo-shamanism worthy of study, there is a tendency to call for engaged, transparent, and experiential participation.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I have combined the standard tools of cultural research—including prolonged fieldwork, participant-observation, qualitative interviews, and extensive field notes—with auto-ethnography resulting from experiential participation. This allows me, the researcher, to judge whether my own experience in the field represents the experience of the population I am studying.

Engaging the Unseen

This research was undertaken ethnographically and I relied on classic participant-observation and interviews coupled with experiential engagement in modern shamanic activities, practices, and healing work. The crux is, that most of what takes place in neo-shamanic activities is not see-able in the material sense.⁶ The defining characteristic of modern shamanic work is that it requires an altered state of consciousness in which the

⁶ While this research approached the study of unseen (to outsiders) experiences by engaging in those experiences (“experiential participation”), there are other ways to approach the study of the unseen—such as the scientific study of the brain activity in meditating Tibetan monks (see Shreeve’s National Geographic article “Beyond the Brain” at: <http://science.nationalgeographic.com/science/health-and-human-body/human-body/mind-brain/>)

unseen becomes manifest and healing flows from this seminal experience. Had I limited my research to classic participant-observation I would have for the most part watched people lying down in a circle with their eyes covered in a dimly lit room, with perhaps a candle burning in the center, while someone stood up and beat a drum for about 15 minutes. I then would have seen them rustle about, sit up, grab notebook and pen, write for a bit and then bring their attention back to the circle. At that point, I would be able to record the verbal reports of their experiences. I could add participation to that observation, lying down myself, with my eyes covered and experiencing the physical sensation of lying in a darkened room while listening to a drum-beat, but I would not be participating in what everyone else was actually doing. They were not just lying there being physical. They were, in the neo-shamanic framework, traveling to the extra-material dimensions of existence, finding there and interacting with sentient beings. Only by also engaging in the altered state of consciousness brought on by the drum-beat would I share in their experience. What I found was, then, that when people reported their experiences, their shamanic journeys to the group, I had a sense of what it felt like to travel in similar places and interact with similar beings, all while retaining a conscious awareness of my physical self. What I could not do, although some people reported being able to do this, was meet up with the other journeyers and interact with them in the shamanic realm –thus I could not determine an objective reality of my shamanic participation in that particular sense. Perhaps if I underwent long and arduous training I would be able to do so, for the individuals who reported that type of experience were highly trained and experienced practitioners.

I did, however, experience a convergence of group experience. Recall my experience with my first shamanic healing session, where Steve, the fledgling shaman, and I had similar images and information to report after the session. Similarly, when working with drumming circles, I would periodically participate in a group journey, where all participants journeyed with the same intent or question to answer. Invariably when people reported their experiences, they jibed. For example, one time, we did a group healing journey called the “spirit canoe” for a group member. In this journey we sat on the floor around the individual seeking healing, as if we were sitting in a canoe with her. The canoe’s “pilot” beat the drum and we each undertook a shamanic journey to the nonordinary realm to ask for her healing. When we finished and talked about our experiences, it happened that we all abandoned our regular (and personal) entrances to the shamanic realm and instead reported entering the Lower World by falling down a waterfall. The participants also independently reported having been in a similar environment –cliffs, by a choppy sea—and brought back information that coalesced around a theme: shed your grasp on your illness, take this first step and only then will Spirit give you direction for healing, and when you want to heal the treasure of health will be unburied. While the danger here is to see only the commonalities and discard anything that does not fit, again and again in the course of my research the commonalities of such group undertakings outweighed the variation in response.

Another benefit I found in experiential engagement with neo-shamanism was that it gave me a referent for what my study participants were describing when they talked about neo-shamanic experiences and healing sessions, both during group activities and in their interviews with me. Much of what takes place in an extra-material realm is

ineffable. The words of modern language are not well situated to describe this nonordinary reality. Let me illustrate this using an example from medicine. Nettleton et al. (2004), in their discussion of people with medically unexplained symptoms, state that it is difficult for the patients to talk about their stories because they do not have a diagnosis and thus lack a biomedical category to draw upon. So, they usually resort to some sort of psychological explanation not because it fits their situation, but because it is the “most readily available discursive repertoire with which they have to engage” (61-62). So too, in describing the experience of nonordinary reality, where nothing can be seen in the material world, the experience is often relegated to the interior, i.e., imagination, because it is the most convenient language available. Modernity secularized society, and in so doing, made the idea of a real, unseen, extra-material world external to the individual outside the realm of possibility –the unthinkable. What I found in the course of my fieldwork is that people used multiple terms and images to evoke the idea they were trying to get across, much like I do in this dissertation. Instead of saying “nonordinary reality,” which is the common term used to refer to where one goes during a shamanic journey, I say “unseen, extra-material, spiritual, energetic reality, alongside and in addition to the material world” because I assume the reader lacks a referent.

One limitation to experiential study of the unseen is whether or not the researcher is able to participate in the experiences described by the other participants. Glass-Coffin (2009), after decades of anthropological work with and writing about Peruvian *curanderas* (shamans), explains her long, now broken, silence on the transformative aspect of the deep human-spirit connection of the shaman:

I’ve never before had access to that space in which such conversations and experiences occur. Like many anthropologists investigating religious phenomena, I

have interpreted informants' accounts of interactions, revelations, and spiritual experiences even while unable to perceive their connections to unseen worlds firsthand. (58)

This brings up a question about what segment of the modern population can have these experiences? In the course of this research, I observed that the vast majority of the individuals in the classes, workshops, and groups practices I participated in reported being able to access that unseen world without too much trouble. I, too, was able to access and experience “the spiritual transformation and consciousness of that connection to the world of the unseen” (Glass-Coffin 2009: 58). However, people self-select into neo-shamanism, and those who joined my research endeavor may or may not accurately represent the human ability (or lack of it) to access an extra-material world.

Anthropologists may indeed reflect a very different segment of the larger population in terms of ability to connect with the unseen, and some researchers could be limited by their inability to incorporate experiential participation and observation into their investigation of spiritual healing systems.

Engaging experientially in the study of modern shamanic practice is akin to the classic anthropological facets of fieldwork – a combination of learning the language of the study population and participating in the daily tasks of living. This is an effort to get to the insiders' point of view. However, a sticky point of studying an unseen phenomenon in my own culture, was that it was difficult to “leave the field” to regain an etic perspective, and in this sense, “going native” was a real danger. I needed to touch base with the larger, disenchanted society around me periodically –that very culture that held anything “New Age” as silly. The problem is, even in doing this, I was still participating in the culture of my study population, for each of the individuals enrolled in my study

also interacted with the larger, disenchanted society. So, in a sense I would enter and leave the field periodically, sometimes daily, as I both engaged in neo-shamanic activities and practices and lived my “normal” life, making a living, doing my job, buying my groceries and so forth. In another sense, I never left the field because the modern US was my field site. This is an area that demands following Guerrier’s (2002) admonition to question everything and Kleinman’s (1995) caution to recognize all researchers occupy a situated standpoint, and that observational position should be specified.

Periodically touching the larger, disenchanted culture and keeping a personal journal guided me through the transformative experience of anthropological fieldwork. While all fieldwork can have a transformative effect on an anthropologist, those engaged in the experiential study of the unseen are especially vulnerable. As I engaged in five years of studying of modern shamanism, my academic skepticism of anything extra-material was gradually eroded and softened into an open skepticism. My worldview was indeed transformed –I experienced such “far out there” neo-shamanic work that it shook up my Western, academic worldview. One such experience happened when, in two different shamanic circles, two different individuals brought back the same image for me. What happened was this: in one shamanic circle we did shamanic journeys for each other to bring back information about our individual purpose in life. In this group, the individual who journeyed for me brought back the image of a braid of long grasses, which was given to her in the spirit realm by an old woman with long white hair. I didn’t recognize the braided grass, never having seen such a thing as she described it. Weeks later, in a different shamanic circle, we each journeyed to bring back a gift from the spiritual realm for one another. The woman who journeyed for me was not privy to the

earlier experience but brought back the same image of a braid of long grasses, given to her by an older woman with long white hair. Then, a few months later, at a healing session, a neo-shamanic practitioner brought out a braid of sweet grass and I saw in the material world what had been given to me from the shamanic world. I could not attribute any of that to my deep psyche or my imagination. James (1907) suggests that in order for my spiritual experience to be a genuine intellectual option it must be feasible, be something to which I cannot be indifferent, and be significant, that is, not trivial. Well, it is feasible that the experiences these two women had in their journeys on my behalf were external to themselves, it is compelling indeed in terms of my understanding about how the universe operates and what is real, and as a result it is not trivial and did challenge my assumptions.

It is outside the scope of this research project to try to determine whether what I have experienced during the modern shamanic journey is real or imaginary. As a researcher, I must acknowledge the modern shamanic experiences I have had and examine how they have changed my perception of neo-shamanism and my world over time. I cannot deny that I cannot use the language of science to explain many of the experiences I have had during the course of this research. While they have opened me to an understanding of the universe that is broader than the strict materialism of the scientific paradigm, I do not build a system of belief around them. I take the stance that I neither believe nor disbelieve in an extra-material (shamanic) realm (external to myself) or the beings therein –I can only claim experience of it and them. By taking this position, I am precisely that modern individual to whom Harner (1980) was referring when he suggested that some people “no longer trust ecclesiastical dogma and authority to provide

them with... evidence that there is spirit... They require higher levels of evidence” (xi-xii). To that I add that individuals like myself also distrust the scientific paradigm to be the last word on phenomena, which cannot, as of yet, be measured by its tools. In the end, it remains a mystery, defying Western explanation.

And so, in this way, I walk the thin line between already native and going native. I am a native of modern, contemporary Western culture, I fit neatly into the group Ray and Anderson (2000) labeled the *Core Creatives*,⁷ and I undertook this research with an open experiential approach, in an effort to avoid the dichotomies between “real” and “unreal,” “true” and “untrue.” As a result I have experienced many things I cannot explain. My nonordinary experiences are data and inform my understanding of what the participants of neo-shamanism themselves have to say about it. It is empirical information about an activity and a world that does not fit with a modern paradigm.

⁷ Recall, as discussed in Chapter II, that Core Creatives are individuals concerned with living an authentic life, learning through an intimate engagement with “rich, visceral, sensory stuff of life” and direct, personal experience (Ray & Anderson 2000: 22). They have a well-developed social conscience, an interest in self-actualization and spirituality, and are likely to utilize alternative medicines.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Data Collection and Analysis

This is an ethnographic study of the modern use of shamanism in contemporary US society. This research seeks to describe neo-shamanism and its participants in contemporary US culture, characterize neo-shamanism as a healing system in the US, and examine factors that may impact an individual's level of enchantment.⁸

The research occurred in an urban center in the Intermountain West over a period of five years. To understand the complexity of neo-shamanism and the role it plays in peoples' lives, I employed multiple methods of data collection to create an ethnographic record that would allow me to represent the cultural members in their own terms. These methods included 1) participant-observation and experiential participation, 2) in-depth, qualitative interviews, and 3) examination of written documents (in this case, popular-press books that are available to, and read by, neo-shamanic participants). To ensure credibility of my ethnographic data, I sought prolonged engagement so I might get past the ideal representations of neo-shamanism and identify the underlying, more real components of it, and opted to engage in the extra-material, commonly referred to as

⁸ As discussed in Chapter I, Weber (1946) suggested that modernity *disenchanted* the world, i.e., that in the process of modernity, science and rationality replaced magical means to implore the spirits, resulting in the Cartesian differentiation of matter and spirit. Neo-shamanism, ostensibly based on traditional (premodern) shamanism, rests on the premise of an *enchanted* world.

nonordinary reality, experientially so I might better understand my informants. My decision to employ multiple methods provided triangulation by offering a variety of viewpoints from different perspectives. Combining insights from group activities and workshops, personal experience, one-on-one interviews, and published accounts provided a greater level of confidence that what I conclude is truly reflective of participants' experience with neo-shamanism and its role as an alternative healing modality.

The pilot investigation for this research project took place over 20 months, from November 2003 to July 2005, while I studied for my comprehensive exams. During the pilot phase, I read as many popular books on shamanism as I could find (approximately 53 books – see Appendix B for a complete list of these books), attended and participated in four weekend workshops about neo-shamanism, and had six healing sessions with a variety of neo-shamanic practitioners. I conducted interviews with four neo-shamanic practitioners and seven of their clients. Lastly, I administered a small “quick and dirty” survey about the use of alternative medicine and knowledge of neo-shamanism in a few local spots: a business class at a local college, a public transportation stop, and an office for a health care organization, just to get a feel for the local population in the geographic area of my research.

The main fieldwork for this research took place from August 2005 – November 2008 (a period of 39 months). During that time I participated in neo-shamanic activities as opportunities arose, such as group workshops, neo-shamanic drum circles, and fire ceremonies. In addition, I committed myself to a daily neo-shamanic journey practice so I might learn the skill of shamanic journeying as it was practiced by my informants. I

also conducted a series of qualitative interviews with both practitioners of and participants in neo-shamanic activities (August 2007 – August 2008).

While in the field, I attended four beginner and seven advanced weekend workshops on neo-shamanism. Two of the beginner workshops were held by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (FSS), one by the Four Winds Society (4W), and one by an individual not affiliated with a specific school. The advanced workshops were offered variously by a practitioner trained in the FSS school, a shamanic practitioner of a Peruvian tradition, and one of the Toltec Path. I took two 8-week classes about neo-shamanism, one taught by a woman trained by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, and one by a husband and wife team trained by the Four Winds Society. During this time I also participated in four different neo-shamanic drum circles that met twice a month for time periods ranging from 4 to 12 months. I informed each group I participated in about my research project. I did not obtain individual informed consent from group participants as per the IRB contract for this project, as all group information will be reported only in the aggregate.

In each group setting, I collected data through participant-observation, experiential participation, and direct dialogue with participants. Demographic characteristics were compiled through observation (such as noting the gender, ethnicity, and approximate age of participants) combined with direct inquiry (for specific information such as education and profession). Thorough field notes were completed following each group activity, and these detailed my general observations, notable verbatim comments, and any personal, experiential data that emerged. Any supplemental materials, such as handouts, were kept as part of my field notes.

In addition to the group workshops and classes, I pursued individual, experiential participation through a personal journey practice, neo-shamanic healing sessions, and apprenticeships with two neo-shamanic practitioners. These two practitioners, one trained by the FSS and one trained by 4W, served as key informants for my research. I met with my key informants on average every other week for the duration of this research project to discuss the information I was learning, my experiences, and their practices. As an apprentice, I was trained in certain shamanic techniques and given greater instruction than I would have been able to glean through workshops or individual healing sessions. I also had a total of seven healing sessions with practitioners trained by either the Foundation for Shamanic Studies or the Four Winds Society. All apprenticeship meetings and individual healing sessions were recorded in extensive field notes.

I was first introduced to the importance of personally learning how to undertake the neo-shamanic journey in November 2003 when I started the pilot study for this research. What started as an early, periodic exploration into journeying, ultimately became a daily practice of meditation and neo-shamanic journeys while immersed in fieldwork. The intent of this was to better situate myself to understand the more advanced experience of the neo-shamanic practitioners, familiarize myself with the images and experiences detailed in shamanic workshops, and enable me to participate fully in more advanced group activities (such as fire and drum circles). These daily meditations/journeys were essential for me to achieve full experiential engagement with the neo-shamanic culture. Following each session I recorded my experiences and observations in a personal, reflexive journal that was used as a complement to my field notes.

For my participant data I conducted interviews during the period of August 2007 – August 2008 with 33 individuals engaged with neo-shamanism as participants or practitioners. Study participants were recruited by word of mouth and fliers posted in coffee shops, New Age bookstores, and yoga studios. I used a convenience and snowball sample because there is no known, defined population of people engaged in neo-shamanism from which to take a random or representative sample. Interviews were semi-structured and qualitative, generally lasting 60-90 minutes, and were voice recorded. They took place in a location of the interviewee's choice: a restaurant, park, their home, my home, or my University office. All individuals who were interviewed signed an IRB informed consent form. Occasionally I had follow-up interactions with study participants via phone or email. Phone conversations were recorded in field notes and emails added to field notes. The interviews were transcribed and coded for emergent themes.

As a final element of my fieldwork, I was presented the opportunity to travel to Nepal with one of my key informants to observe and participate in traditional shamanic Nepali and Tibetan healing rituals. This informant has spent three months of each of the past 10 years living and working with the shamanic healers there with whom she has developed relationships. I was able, during a sixty-day period in the Fall of 2008, to observe the traditional shamanic healing rituals of both Nepali *jhankris* and Tibetan *lhapas*, to have those healing rituals performed for me when I was ill, and to participate in a traditional Nepali all night initiation ritual called *gufa*, side by side with Nepali *jhankris* in training. My experiences in Nepal provided a counter-point to modern shamanism. I observed traditional shamans who are practicing as the culmination of an unbroken cultural healing lineage and participated in traditional shamanistic healing work

within its cultural context. This provided a larger cultural context for studying the transformation of shamanism into modern culture. See **Table 1** for a summary of data collection activities and time spent in the field.

Data Collected

Group Data Collected

Within group activities such as workshops, classes, drum circles, and fire ceremonies, demographic data for total participants (n=325) was estimated based on a combination of observation and discourse. At each group experience, the number of participants and gender of participants was counted and recorded. Estimations of race/ethnic group, age, income, and level of education were determined by listening, observing, and talking to people.

Interview Data Collected

Informant interviews (n=33) used a semistructured design, and covered such topics as how the interviewees became interested in modern shamanism, their training, their experiences with neo-shamanic healing, their health status before and after participation in neo-shamanism, their engagement in an enchanted cosmos (or lack thereof), their connection to community and their experiences with other healing systems such as biomedicine and conventional psychotherapy.

The interviews relied on open-ended inquiry to create a dialogue in which the interviewee could speak freely of his or her background and experience with neo-

Table 1

Data Collection Activities: Pilot Study and Fieldwork
November 2003 – November 2008

Activity	Summary Description	Total Hours
GROUP DATA		
Workshops/Classes	<p>Workshops were 1-2 day activities (sometimes spaced over many weeks or months) in which groups of 5-85 people gathered to learn from and practice with a more advanced “teacher.” Classes met weekly for 2-3 hours for approximately 8 weeks.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundation for Shamanic Studies Basic Workshop: Core Shamanism • Toltec Mystery School Workshop: Four Agreements & Self Mastery (four 2-day workshop bi-monthly over 8 months) • Class: Munay Ki Rites (1 session/week over 8 weeks) <p>Number of workshops attended (pilot study): 4 Number of workshops/classes attended: 13</p>	254 hours
Drum Circles	<p>Drum Circles are multi-session group activities in which a group of 3-10 people gather two times per month, for 2- 3 hours, to meditate and journey together. The power of the drum circle is enhanced by the regular participation by a consistent group of participants. The typical drum circle might meet every other week for 4-12 months, although “practitioner” informants report being part of drum circles that have regularly met for many years.</p> <p>Number of different drum circles: 4 Duration of participation: 4 – 12 months</p>	164 hours

Table 1 continued

Activity	Summary Description	Total Hours
Fire Ceremonies	<p>Fire Ceremonies are one-time gatherings in which groups of 3-10 people come together to share in a collective ritual. Often scheduled consistent with a notable lunar or seasonal event, fire ceremonies last approximately 3 hours.</p> <p>Number of fire ceremonies attended: 5</p>	15 hours
EXPERIENTIAL DATA		
Daily Practice	<p>A key element of neo-shamanism is engagement with the extra-ordinary realm through the shamanic “journey.” I quickly learned that to best understand the experience and healing of neo-shamanism, to pursue “experiential observation,” I would need to be able to participate in journeying. Journeying is a skill that requires regular practice, so I committed to a daily practice of journeying during the pilot study and while “in the field.” This typically entailed a 20-30 minute session everyday.</p> <p>Approx number of journeys (pilot study): 300 Approx. number of individual journeys: 1170 Duration of daily journey-practice: 59 months</p>	490 hours
Healing Sessions	<p>To investigate neo-shamanism as a healing modality I participated in healing sessions. Similar to the experience of my informants, my sessions centered on physical and emotional healing. The typical healing session lasted 1-3 hours.</p> <p>Individual healing session (pilot study): 6 Individual healing session: 7</p>	26 hours

Table 1 continued

Activity	Summary Description	Total Hours
Apprenticeships	<p>Two key informants emerged from my research, both of which are full-time practitioners of neo-shamanism. Independently, they invited me to apprentice under them so that I might better understand the deeper elements of a neo-shamanic practice and expand my own experiences beyond that which I could achieve in workshops or through my individual journeys. Through regular meetings I was instructed in specific techniques and philosophies, and given the opportunity to practice healing on others.</p> <p>Apprenticeships with practitioner: 2 Average Duration of apprenticeship: 9 months (2 sessions per month)</p>	36 hours
Nepal Shaman Study	<p>In the fall of 2008, I traveled to Nepal to explore Traditional Shamanism in its indigenous context (as a way to compare traditional and modern shamanism). I met and worked with Nepali jhankris and Tibetan lhasas. During this time I experienced personal healing sessions, observed the shamans in their healing practices, and participated in sacred shamanic rituals.</p> <p>Total traditional shamans observed: 5 Total days in direct shamanic practice: 30</p>	
INFORMANT DATA		
Depth Interviews	<p>To better understand and interpret participants' experiences with neo-shamanism, and to assess how neo-shamanism acts as a healing system, I conducted in-depth interviews. Both participants in neo-shamanism as well as full-time practitioners participated in the interviews. A typical interview took 60-90 minutes, and was recorded and later transcribed.</p> <p>Total In-depth interviews (pilot study): 11 Total In-depth Interviews: 33</p>	55 hours (in dialogue with informants)

Table 1 continued

Activity	Summary Description	Total Hours
Survey (Pilot Study)	<p>During the pilot study I conducted a brief survey to assess familiarity with shamanism and experience with alternative healing. Using forced-choice and open-ended questions, this pen-and-paper survey was given to a convenience sample composed of students, people at a public transportation stop, and employees at a nearby healthcare organization office.</p> <p>Total Respondents: 29</p>	
WRITTEN DATA		
Popular-press Survey	<p>During the pilot study I identified and read 53 different popular-press books. Studying these books allowed me to get an introduction to neo-shamanism and provided background and knowledge that might be taken-for-granted by participants who have themselves read the books or are better versed in neo-shamanism. These books revealed experiences, techniques, and accounts that could not be easily observed otherwise and offered a good source for generating questions and issues to explore through interviews and participant-observation and experiential participation.</p> <p>Total books in Popular Press Survey: 53 (See Appendix B for list of popular press books)</p>	265 hours

Note: Participants and practitioners of neo-shamanism face a particular challenge in balancing their enchanted shamanic experiences with their largely disenchanting daily lives. This interplay creates a tension that is in itself a component of the culture. For that reason, I studied shamanism in situ of my own daily life so my experience would be closest to those who I studied.

shamanism. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim and coded for emergent themes. In addition, any notes taken during the interview, and following each interview, were included in the field notes. Due to the one-on-one nature of the interviews, much of the demographic data collected from the interview was offered directly by the participant for the record. See **Table 2** for the type of demographic data collected in the interviews through direct inquiry and researcher observation.

Descriptive Analysis

Results: Demographic Composition of Study Population

Group Activities

In total, 325 people participated in the group activities I attended during the fieldwork portion of my research. As these data are reported only in aggregate, participants did not sign informed consent (as per instructed by IRB). However, I always made my research explicitly known to the group leader before the event and was always welcomed to participate. I also identified myself during group introductions to all participants as a graduate student studying neo-shamanism. The response to this was always positive, with many telling me how lucky I was to be studying such an important and interesting topic.

Participants in the neo-shamanic group activities I attended were 75% female, in the majority White (with Native American, Hispanic, and Mexican ethnic groups represented), and generally middle-aged, but spanning college-age to retirement (see **Table 3**). I did not collect specific demographic data from group participants and so

Table 2

Interview Demographic Data Self-Identified by Participants

<u>Gender:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male • Female 	<u>Age:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20-29 • 30-39 • 40-49 • 50-59 • 60-69 	<u>Race/Ethnicity:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White • Hispanic • Other 	<u>Income:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low (<\$25,000/year) • Mid (\$25,000 - 100,000/year) • High (>\$100,000/year)
<u>Education Level:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High School • Some College • College Degree • Graduate School 	<u>Religion of Origin:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christian • Buddhist • Latter Day Saint (Mormon) • Atheist/Agnostic • Catholic 	<u>Role within Neo-Shamanism:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practitioner • Participant 	<u>Shamanic Training/Tradition:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundation for Shamanic Studies (FSS) • Four Winds Society (4W) • Long House • Sweat Lodge • Vision Quest • Drum Circle • Ayahuasca • Peyote • Indigenous Teacher • Toltec Way • Other

Table 3

Demographic Composition of Study Population

	GROUPS (n=325)	INTERVIEWS (n=33)
SEX	75% Female 25% Male	64% Female 36% Male
RACE	Majority White: also present, Hispanic, Mexican, Native American	91% White 9% Hispanic
AGE	Majority middle-aged Range: teens to seniors	12% <35 years 64% 35-54 years 24% >55 years
INCOME	Fees range: \$10-30/month for circles \$200-275 for a weekend workshop Anecdotally: there were low, mid, and high income participants in attendance	24% Low (<\$25,000/year) 67% Mid (\$25,000 – 100,000/year) 9% High (>\$100,000/year)
EDUCATION	Anecdotally, range: less than high school to Doctorate/MD	78% had some college or higher (39% graduate degree)

cannot address with confidence their economic level. Income levels were estimated by a combination of observation, the cost of the workshop, and direct dialogue with participants. At the minimum, participants of weekend workshops and courses had to pay a \$100-250 fee, while participants of drum circles paid minimal fees to cover room rental (\$10-\$30/month). Some group participants were very wealthy, but they were in the minority. Generally, participants probably fell into the middle-income range, however, a portion of them were of low-income, and spoke about the difficulty of coming up with

the fees, sometimes paying in installments or having the fees paid by family members. Some who traveled to workshops slept in their cars or stayed on other participants' couches. Similarly, education level was not assessed formally. Anecdotally it ranged from less than high school to PhD-level.

Interviews

In total, I interviewed 33 individuals during the fieldwork portion of my study (see **Table 3**). Thirty-six percent were male (n=12) and 64% were female (n=21). Twelve percent (n=4) were less than 35 years old, 64% (n=21) were 35-54 years old (9 were 35-44; 12 were 45-54), and 24% (n=8) were 55 years old or older (4 were 55-64; 4 were 65 and above). For Age Distribution, see **Figure 1**. Twenty-one percent (N=7) completed high school, 9% (n=3) some college, 30% (n=10) had a bachelor's degree, and 39% (n=13) had completed education beyond the bachelor's degree (see **Figure 2**). Twenty-four percent (n=8) self-reported a low-income range (<\$25,000/year), 67% (n=22) middle-range (\$25,000-\$100,000/year) and 9% (n=3) high income (>100,000/year) (see **Figure 3**). Ninety-one percent (n=30) were White, and 9% (n=3) were Hispanic (see **Figure 4**).

Of those interviewed, twenty-one percent (n=7) identified themselves as neo-shamanic practitioners, and 79% (n=26) as participants. Occupations of interview participants included the following: administrative, managerial, artist, author, writer, chiropractor, counselor, life-coach, psychologist, yoga instructor, ski instructor, geologist, homemaker, genealogist, massage therapist, aesthetician, minister, handy-man,

psychic reader, energy worker, military, restaurant, service, housecleaning, student, unemployed, and shamanic practitioner.

Interviewees reported receiving training in neo-shamanism and participating in neo-shamanic activities with the following groups, schools, and/or traditions: 39% (n=13) reported their primary shamanic training to be with the Foundation for Shamanic Studies founded by M. Harner; 27% (n=9) with the Four Winds Society founded by A. Villoldo; 24% (n=6) with a native or indigenous practitioner or teacher (including Long House, Sweat Lodges, Vision Quest, Peyote, Ayahuasca, and Toltec); and 15% (n=5) Other, including self-taught or spontaneous. In addition, 8% (n=6) engaged with a single neo-shamanic tradition, 36% (n=12) with two, 27% (n=3) with three, and 8% (n=6) with four different traditions. No one reported participating in more than four traditions, either simultaneously or over time. **Figure 5** shows the distribution of engagement with (neo)shamanic traditions reported by study participants, and includes individual engagement with multiple traditions and activities.

Summary of Demographic Composition of Study Population (Group and Interview)

Because there is no known, defined population of neo-shamanic participants, I cannot with confidence say if my study population was representative of the larger population of neo-shamanism. Most of the literature about neo-shamanism assumes participants to be white, middle-aged, educated, and of the upper middle-class (see, for example, Lindquist 1997, Jakobsen 1999, Blain 2002). The demographic composition of my study population suggests that there is likely more variation in the population than the literature suggests. It is likely that people engaged in neo-shamanism fit into the group

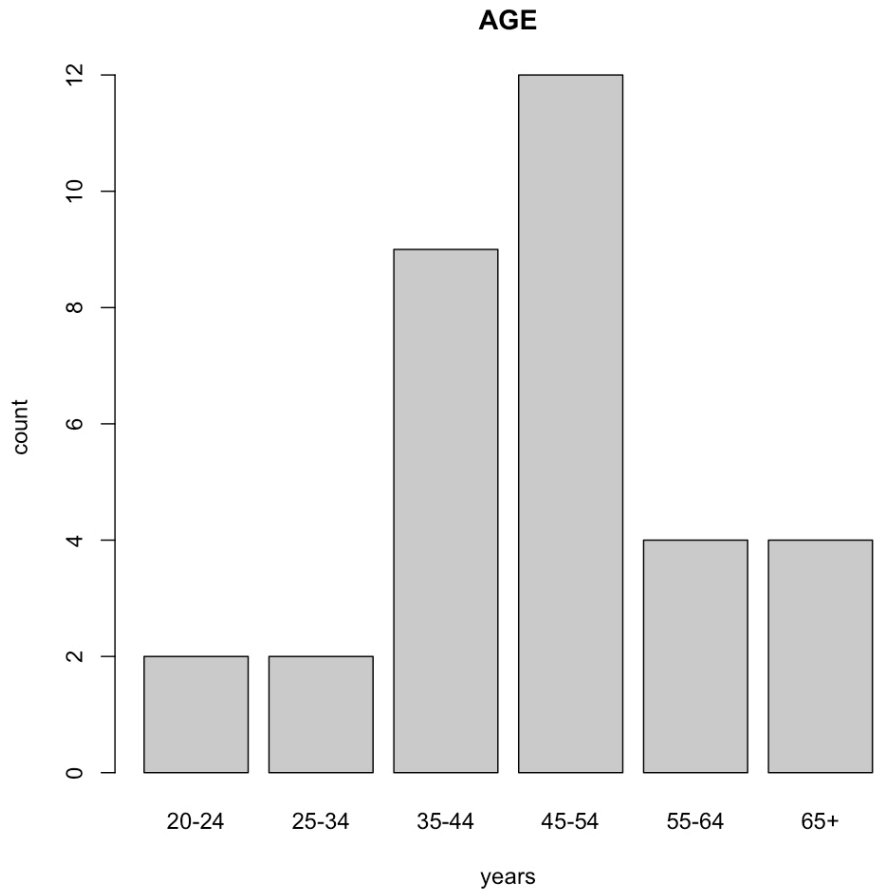


Figure 1: Age Distribution of Interview Sample

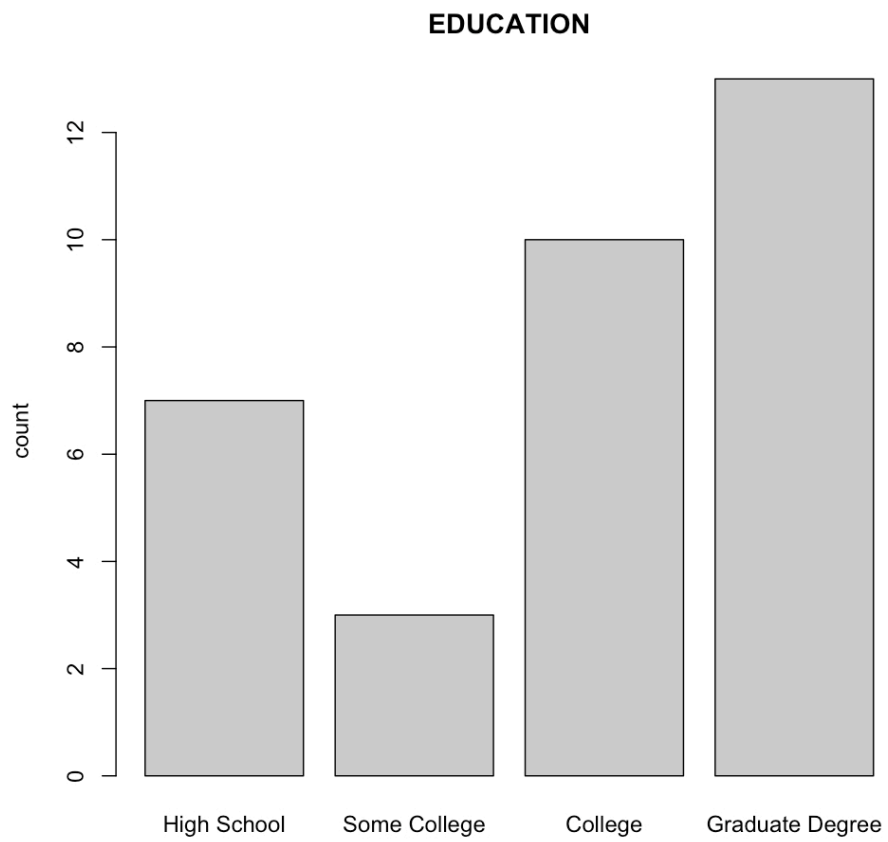


Figure 2: Level of Education Completed of Interview Sample

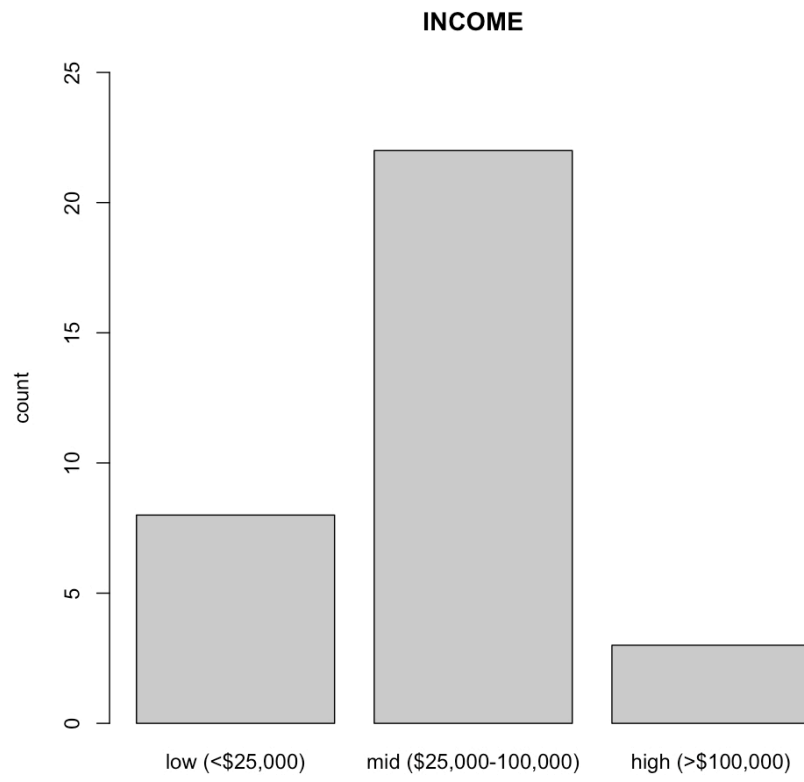


Figure 3: Level of Income of Interview Sample

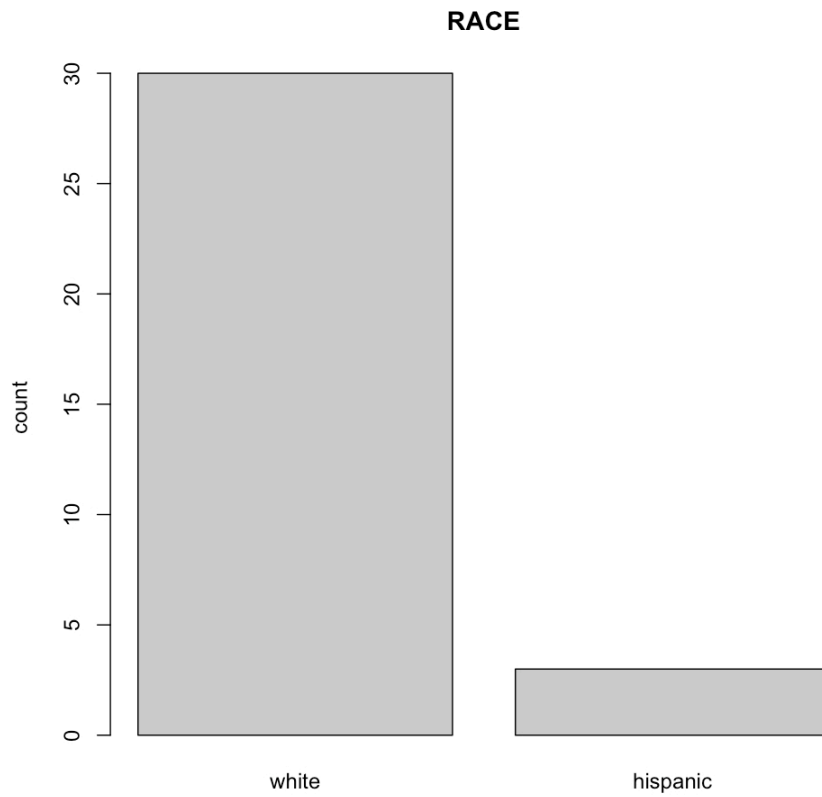


Figure 4: Self-Identified Race of Interview Sample

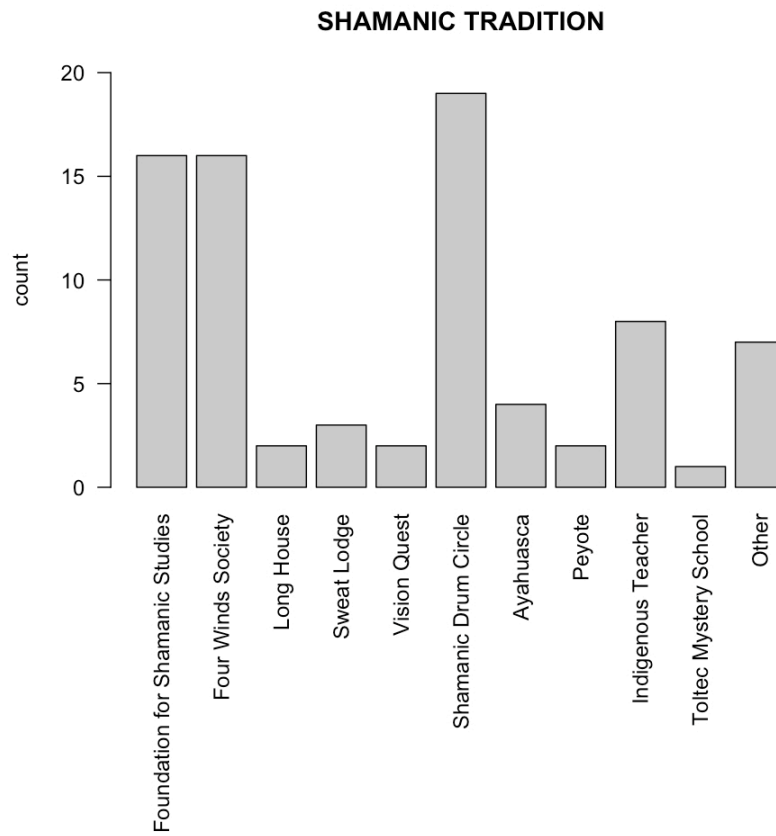


Figure 5: Shamanic Traditions/Schools in which Interview Sample Received Training, Schooling, or Healing (includes individual engagement with multiple traditions)

identified by Ray and Anderson (2000) as “Core Creatives.”⁹ Ray and Anderson (2000) report that the approximately 12% of the US population that makes up the Core Creatives are representative of the larger US population, except that they are more highly educated and women are over-represented; but they are not to be pigeon-holed into any certain demographic.

Compared to the US population, females are over-represented in my study population (64-75% as compared to 51% in the US), as is a higher level of education (69% of interviewees had a bachelor’s degree or higher: only 25% of the local and the US population have a bachelor’s degree or higher) (US Census 2006). While the race/ethnicity of my population is less diverse than the US (91% White as compared to 80% in the US) it is representative of the larger local population (93.5% White) (US Census 2006).

In sum, my study population reflected the larger local population it was drawn from, with the exception of gender and education. It is not possible to determine if this interview sample population reflects the larger population of people engaged in neo-shamanism, as the parameters of that population are unknown. However, the demographics of my interview sample were similar to those found in the group workshop and activity data, and the group data reflects a much bigger sample drawn from inside and outside the study area. That said, it is likely the interview sample is biased because interviewees self-selected into the study, and it is likely those that chose to contact me to participate were positively disposed toward neo-shamanism and could claim positive

⁹ “Core Creatives” (as discussed in Chapter II) account for 12% of the US population and are concerned with living an authentic life and learning experientially. They have a well-developed social conscience, an interest in self-actualization and spirituality, and are likely to utilize alternative medicines (Ray & Anderson 2000)

experiences with it. This does seem to be the case, as only 2 of 33 interviewees expressed a negative interaction with some aspects of modern shamanism (such as so-called charlatans or “wannabees”), and even in light of that, they continued to engage in neo-shamanic activities. This limitation of the interview sample is mitigated to some extent by the wider context of five years of fieldwork with practitioners and participants of modern shamanism.

Descriptive Analysis of Interview Data

Following the completion of data collection in the field, I analyzed the field notes and interview transcripts to reveal emergent themes and highlight relationships within the data that best reflect and describe the collective experience of my study participants. For the interview data specifically, I coded the (33) transcribed interviews using pencil and paper, and then used the statistical program R to investigate correlations relevant to the research questions.

To the question of neo-shamanism as a healing practice, the data revealed that participants clearly rely on neo-shamanism for:

- Treatment of Emotional Illness
Issues related to their emotional and psychological condition and health.
- Treatment of Physical Illness
Issues surrounding the healing of aches, pains, disease, and symptoms of disease.
- Treatment of Social Disembeddedness Concerns
Issues related to an individual’s role and connectedness to the collective community and culture.

For those participants who sought shamanic treatment as a healing modality for emotional illness, physical illness, or social disembeddedness concerns, a preponderance

of them reported that their treatment was successful, that is, they received healing of their ailments.

In addition, *Level of Enchantment/Re-Enchantment* emerged as defining constructs to frame the pursuit of and engagement with neo-shamanic activities. The interview results show a clear relationship between the levels of engagement in neo-shamanic activities and the level of enchantment. This dissertation will ultimately explore enchantment and re-enchantment as crucial outcomes of neo-shamanic activities and healing, and discuss the role of enchantment in our modern, disenchanted system of biomedicine and contemporary US culture.

Emotional Illness and Healing

A greater number of interview participants reported seeking shamanic treatment for emotional issues than for physical ones. Eighty-two percent (n=27) of informants reported at least one emotional issue as the basis for their involvement with neo-shamanism. Unlike the physical conditions, which often have a physical, material manifestation, the issues in this category are psychological and emotional by nature and include:

- Depression/lack of vitality
- Anxiety/fear
- Unstable emotions (e.g., anger)
- “Stuck“ (midlife crisis, lack of purpose, habits)
- Addiction
- Abuse (physical, emotional, verbal)
- Sexual abuse
- Failed relationship
- Relationship problems
- Death of a loved one
- Illness of a loved one
- Illness of Self

- Parents alcoholic
- Rape
- Abandonment
- Near death experience
- Low self-esteem
- Suicidal
- Spirit possession
- Family crisis
- “Feel crazy”

Within the emotional issues reported by participants, those most cited as the basis for shamanic treatment included feeling “stuck,” depression, abuse, and relationship issues (see **Figure 6**). While 18% (n=6) of interviewees reported no emotional problems behind their shamanic participation, of the 82% (n=27) who did report emotional issues, 26% (n=7) reported one emotional issue, 41% (n=11) two issues, 11% (n=3) three issues, 0% (n=0) four issues, 11% (n=3) five issues, and 11% (n=3) six or more emotional issues to address through shamanic healing.

Of those 27 participants who reported an emotional issue or issues for healing, 93% (n=25) report that they experienced successful healing and resolution of the emotional issue (see **Table 4**). Among those 25 who reported emotional healing, 24% (n=6) reported one instance of emotional healing, 16% (n=4) reported two instances, 28% (n=7) reported three instances, 24% (n=6) reported four instances, and 8% (n=2) reported five or more instances of emotional healing.

Unlike the case with physical symptoms, where informants often characterized healing “success” by simple alleviation of observable symptoms, the terms used to reported emotional healing were broader and more nonspecific, reflecting the nuances and complexities inherent in treating and resolving emotional and psychological issues.

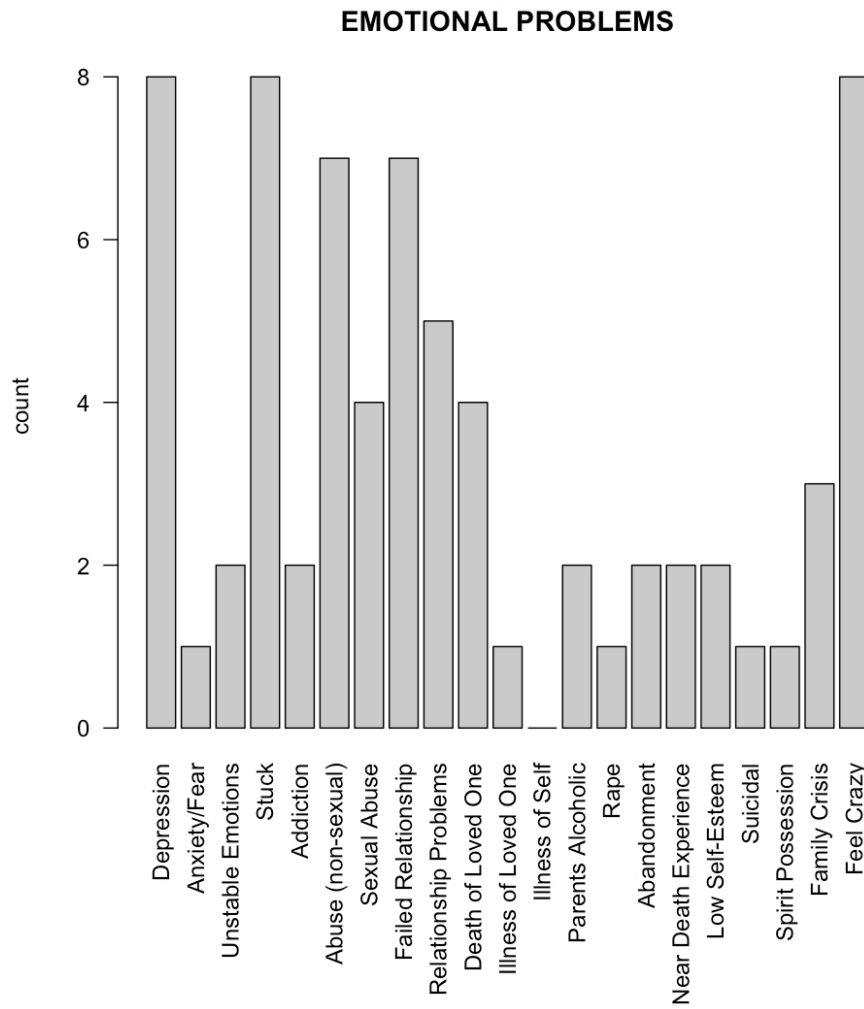


Figure 6: Emotional Issues Reported in Interview Sample
(includes individuals reporting multiple issues)

Table 4

Healing for Emotional Issues

	Reported Emotional Healing N=25	Did Not Report Emotional Healing N=8
Presented Emotional Problems N=27	25	2
Did Not Present Emotional Problems N=6	0	6

93% (25 of 27) reported healing through engagement with neo-shamanism for emotional issues presented

There is, however, a clear pattern of healing the *self* that is reflected in all of the emotional healing reported. Dimensions of emotional healing included:

- A new framework or context for understanding enchanted life experiences
- Self-transformation (feeling “unstuck”)
- Increased self-esteem
- Self-integration (a feeling of wholeness)
- Increased personal power/sense of awareness
- De-possession (healing of spirit-possession)
- Restored relationships
- Recovery from addiction

The most oft-cited outcomes of emotional healing included self-integration (a feeling of “wholeness”) and increased personal power, followed by gaining a new framework for understanding enchanted life experiences and self-transformation (feeling “unstuck”) (see **Figure 7**).

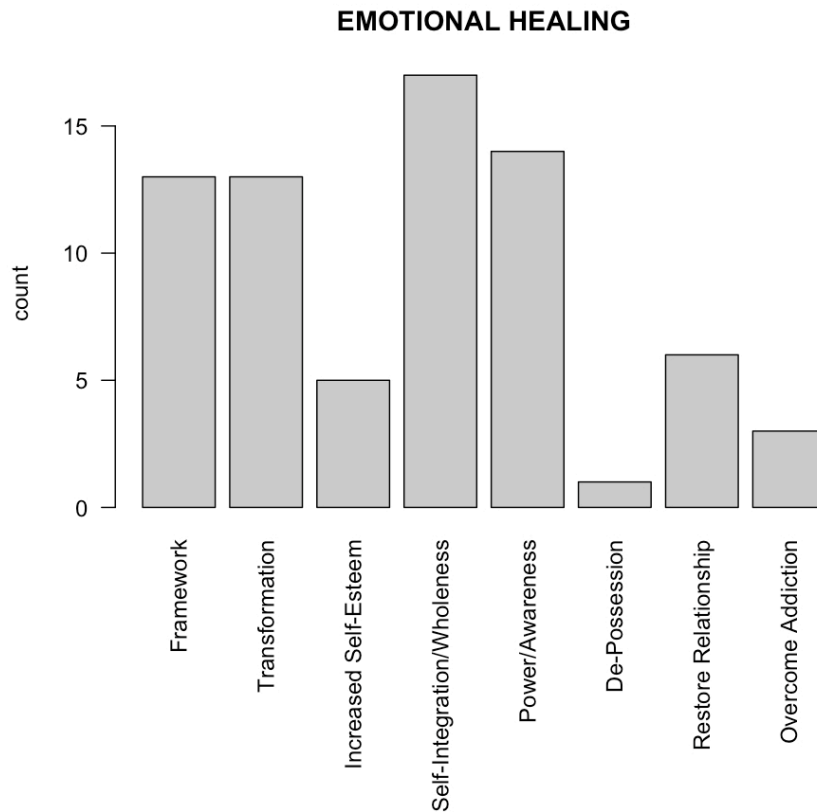


Figure 7: Emotional Healing Reported in Interview Sample
(includes individuals reporting multiple healing instances)

Physical Illness and Healing

Forty-nine percent (n = 16) of the interview participants reported seeking neo-shamanic treatment for a clearly physical ailment. The physical issues treated included:

- Acute illness (Influenza, fever, Migraine/headache)
- Chronic illness (Multiple Sclerosis, cardiovascular disease, dental problems)
- Chronic pain (stomach, low back, knee)
- Cancer
- Low-energy
- Surgery
- Desire to change health behaviors (i.e., be more “healthy”)

Of the physical conditions reported, those most cited for shamanic treatment included chronic illness and chronic pain – arguably, those conditions that are least treatable within the biomedical structure of healthcare (see **Figure 8**). While 52% (n=17) of total participants reported no physical problems behind their involvement in neo-shamanism, of the 49% (n=16) who were motivated by physical ailments, 69% (n=11) reported having had one physical problem and 31% (n=5) reported at least two. Of those participants who reported one or more physical problems, 69% report successful physical healing of their ailment (see **Table 5**). Note that one participant did not intentionally seek shamanic treatment for a physical ailment, but experienced unexpected physical healing of acute pain anyway. Of the 12 participants who reported physical healing, 50% (n=6) reported one instance of physical healing, 42% (n=5) reported two, and 8% (n=1) reported three.

In describing their experience with shamanic healing of physical ailments, informants used language that described very literally how their particular issue was healed. Examples of healing included:

- Relief of acute illness (Influenza, fever, Migraine/headache)
- Relief of chronic illness (Multiple sclerosis, cardiovascular disease, dental problems)
- Cessation of chronic pain (stomach, low back, knee)
- Healing of cancer
- Increased energy
- Positive surgical outcomes and swift healing
- Improved health behaviors

The healing of chronic illness was the most oft-cited outcome of physical healing, which is expected, as chronic illness (and its related symptoms) was the most common physical

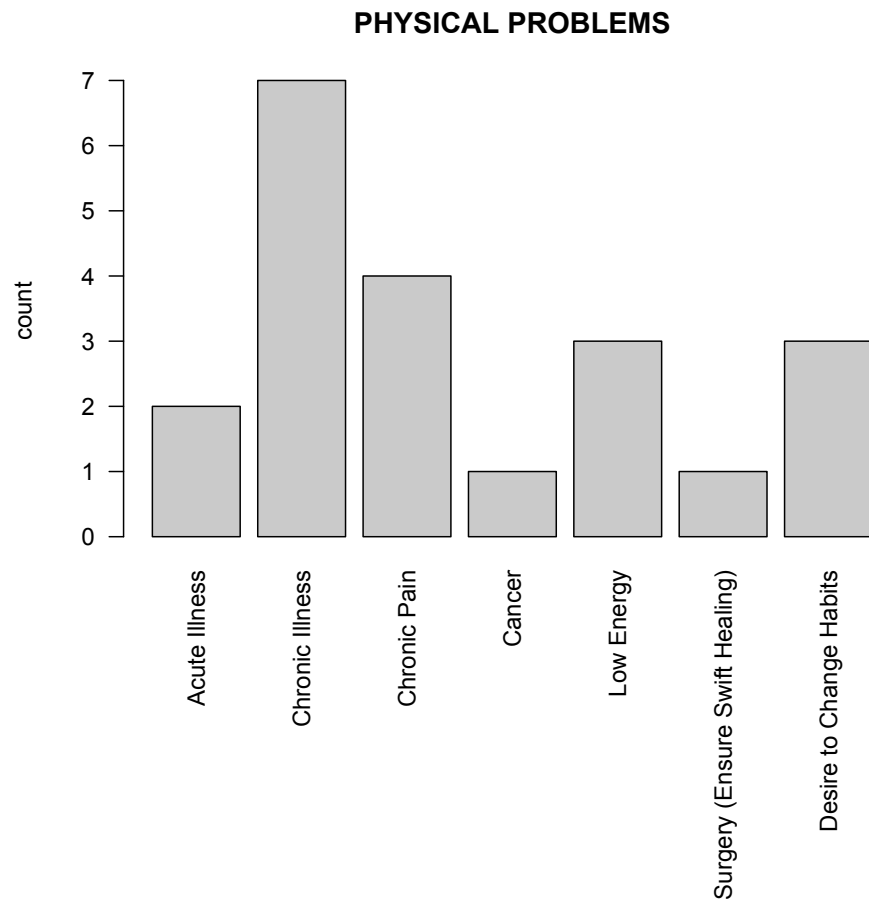


Figure 8: Physical Problems Reported by Interview Sample
(includes individuals reporting multiple physical problems)

Table 5

Healing for Physical Conditions

	Reported Physical Healing N=12	Did Not Report Physical Healing N=21
Presented Physical Problem N=16	11	5
Did Not Present Physical Problem N=17	1	16

69% (11 of 16) reported healing through engagement with neo-shamanism for physical conditions presented. Note that one individual reported physical healing although no physical problem was specifically presented to the neo-shamanic modality. This healing was reported as a “side-effect” of neo-shamanic engagement.

problem reported (see **Figure 9**). Although the majority of those suffering from chronic illness and chronic pain report relief of symptoms (67% and 75% respectively), it is the conditions such as acute illness, increased energy, and changed health behaviors where every person who reported the condition also reported healing of it. Note that for the more complex conditions, such as those identified within chronic illness (i.e., Multiple Sclerosis and cardiovascular disease) and chronic pain (i.e., stomach, back, and joint pain), individuals may not have enjoyed complete resolution of their condition, but do report disappearance or reduced occurrence of symptoms, and an overall higher quality of life. For some of these people in particular, shamanic work not only addressed their physical ailments, but also helped them to shift their health objective from seeking an outright “cure” to one that instead emphasizes a more holistic sense of overall “healing.”

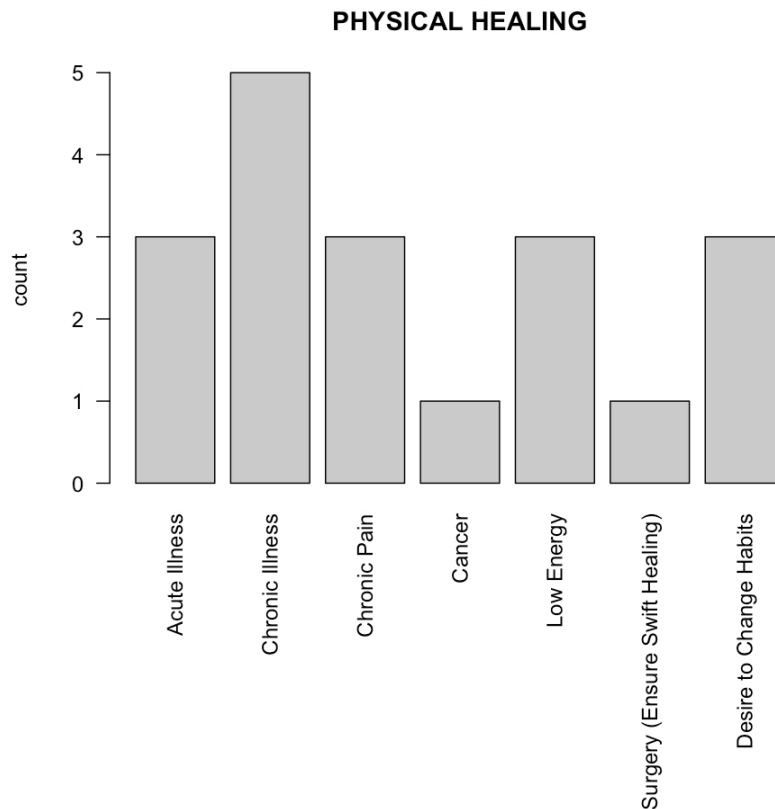


Figure 9: Physical Healings Reported by Interview Sample
(includes individuals reporting multiple healing instances)

Social (dis)Embeddedness Issues

Fifty-two percent (n=17) of interview participants reported that they sought neo-shamanic intervention for issues that can best be categorized as relating to feelings of social disembeddedness (or the individual's sense of being separate and disassociated from the greater collective community and culture). Social disembeddedness issues include:

- Alienation (feelings of “I don’t fit in”)
- Estrangement/shyness
- Lack of culture/lineage in modern society
- Rejection of the individual focus of society – feeling a lack of community

- Feeling caught between two cultures
- Reaction to the misogyny of society
- Spiritual/religious issues – not fitting into, or accepting religion of youth

Although more difficult to observe than physical illness, and more abstract than issues included in emotional illness, social disembeddedness emerged as a clear motivation from which to seek shamanic healing. Following the interview, each participant (not a practitioner) informant was allocated a score for *Level of Social Disembeddedness* based on the number of self-reported disembeddedness issues (0-3 issues/person). Of those who claimed problems with social disembeddedness, almost half of them presented more than one issue. Among those interviewed who reported concerns with social disembeddedness issues (n=17), 59% (n=10) reported concern with one social disembeddedness category and were scored as being somewhat socially disembedded, 35% (n=6) presented concern with two categories and were scored as being socially disembedded, and 6% (n=1) were very disembedded with concerns spanning three different embeddedness categories. The predominant social disembeddedness issues were lack of community, alienation, and reaction to the misogyny of society (see **Figure 10**).

Of those 17 informants who sought shamanic treatment for feelings of disembeddedness, 82% (n=14) reported feeling more socially embedded (i.e., healed of their sense of separation from community and culture) as a result of neo-shamanic activities. Thus, in total, 52% (n=17) of the total interview sample reported an increased sense of community and belonging as a result of neo-shamanism (see **Table 6**).

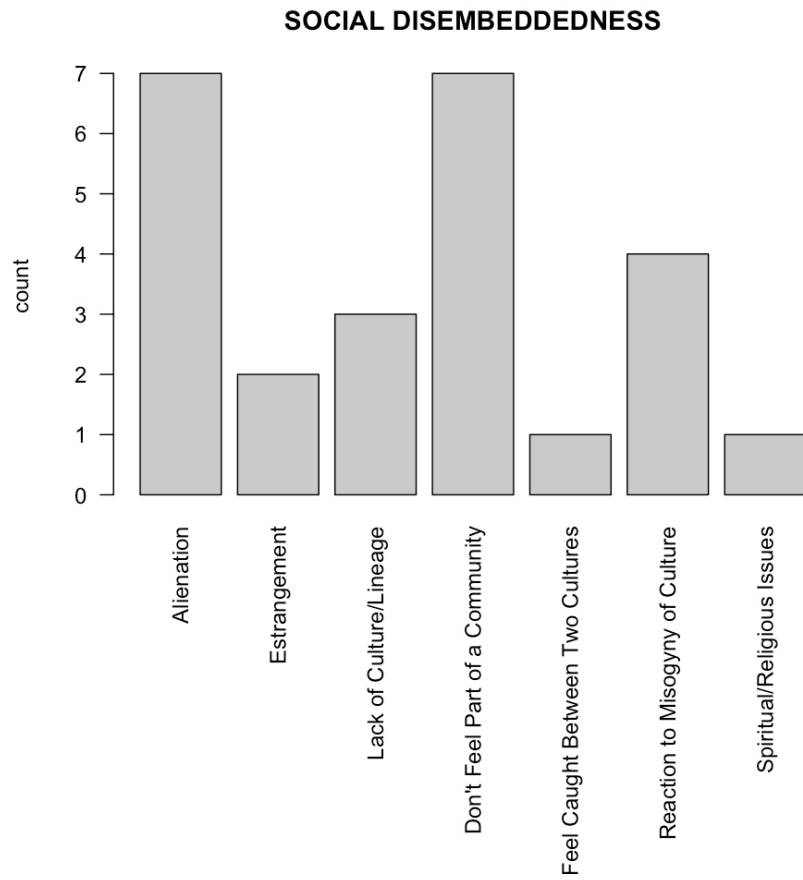


Figure 10: Social Disembeddedness Issues Reported by Interview Sample
(includes individuals reporting multiple social-disembeddedness issues)

Table 6

Finding Community

	Increased Feelings of Social Embeddedness N=17	No Increase in Feelings of Social Embeddedness N=16
Presented Feelings of Social Alienation N=17	14	3
Did Not Present Feelings of Social Alienation N=16	3	13

82% (14 of 17) of those that presented feelings of social alienation reported an increased sense of community (social embeddedness) due to engagement with neo-shamanism. 19% (3 of 16) of those who did not present feelings of social alienation reported an increased sense of social embeddedness as a result of engagement in neo-shamanism.

The terms used by interviewees to indicate renewed social embeddedness after shamanic treatment and activities included:

- New sense of belonging
- Camaraderie with both people and spirits
- Connection to a lineage—be it at the family-level or as broad as a sense of a global lineage of shamans
- Decision to adopt a new culture
- Greater bonds across diversity
- Integration of the feminine
- Adoption of a spiritual framework and “home” from which to raise children (specific to those who participated in the LongHouse tradition)

The three most reported social embeddedness outcomes were: finding a new sense of belonging; gaining camaraderie with people and spirits; and claiming connection to a lineage (family/ancestral/healing lineage) (see **Figure 11**).

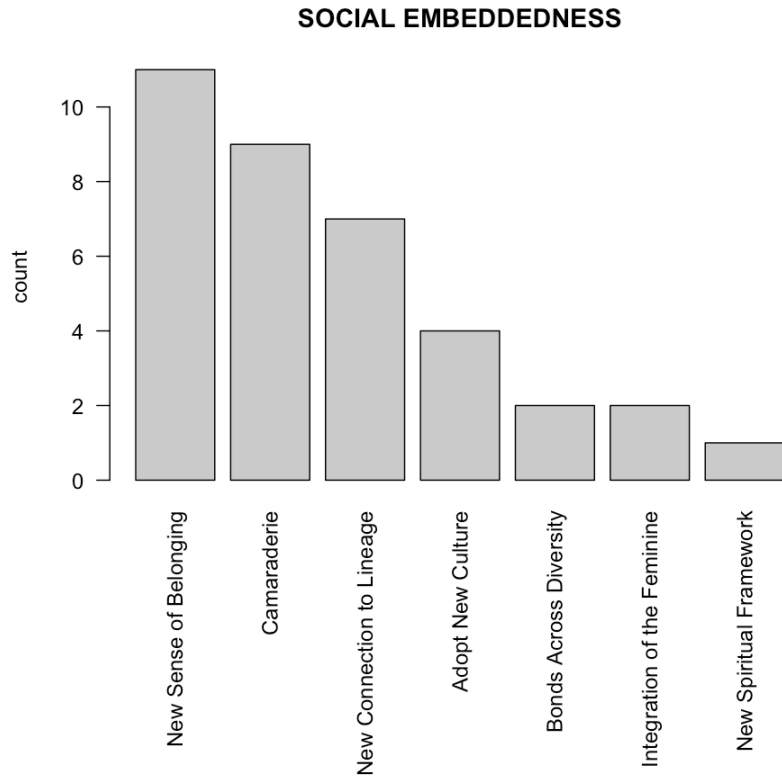


Figure 11: Social Embeddedness Reported by Interview Sample
(includes individuals reporting multiple social embeddedness factors)

Based on their interviews, non-practitioner informants were assigned a *Social Embeddedness* score reflecting their perceived level of social embeddedness. This score was determined by the number of social embeddedness factors claimed as the result of shamanic participation (0-4/person). In the sample, 58% (n=15) reported increased feeling of social embeddedness, and of those, 27% (n=4) scored as somewhat socially embedded (claiming one area of greater connection); 60% (n=9) scored as socially embedded (claiming 2-3 areas of greater connection); and 13% (n=2) scored as very socially embedded (with 4 areas of greater connection).

Engagement and Enchantment

Through analysis of the data, *Level of Engagement*, and *Level of Enchantment/Re-Enchantment* emerged as defining constructs, and introduced the theoretical frame for understanding the role of neo-shamanism in contemporary US culture.

To determine *Level of Engagement*, interview transcripts were reviewed and categorized based on reported participation in neo-shamanic healing sessions, group activities and workshops, and personal practice. Consistent with the New Age participation categories derived from Heelas (1996), the interviewees were then assigned a *Level of Engagement* category: 1) casual part-timer, 2) serious part-timer, and 3) fully engaged. In the interview sample, 12% (n=4) were categorized as casual part-timers, 42% (n=14) were serious part-timers, and 46% (n=15) were fully engaged with neo-shamanism (see **Figure 12**).

Level of Enchantment for each interview participant was determined by review of the interview transcripts for reported rejection of, struggle with, or acceptance of the idea of an enchanted cosmos external to self. After analyzing each transcript for specific mention of an enchanted worldview, and assessing the extent of adoption and comfort with that worldview, four *Level of Enchantment* categories clearly emerged: 1) disenchanted, 2) partly (re)enchanted, 3) fully (re)enchanted, and 4) always enchanted. In the interview sample, only 6% (n=2) of study participants were disenchanted, while 67% (n=22) were at some level of (re)enchantment (13 individuals were partly (re)enchanted, and 9 fully (re)enchanted). Twenty-seven percent (n=9) qualified as always enchanted, and these are people who report that they have never held a disenchanted worldview (see **Figure 13**).

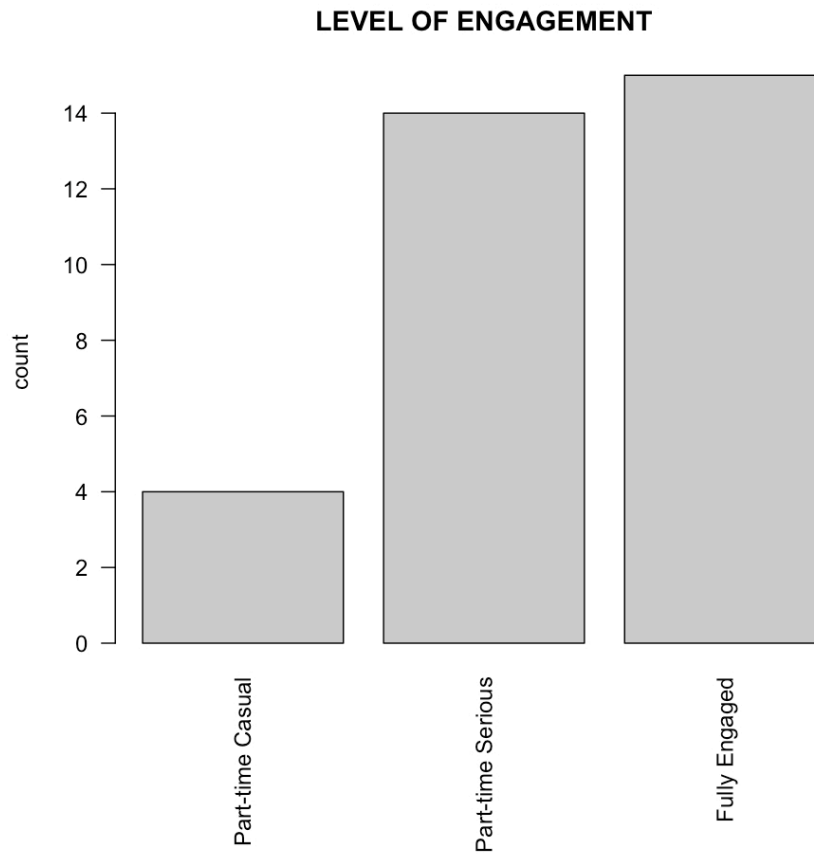


Figure 12: Level of Engagement of Interview Sample

46% (15 of 33) of interview participants report involvement in neo-shamanic activities that would indicate they are *fully engaged*. Not surprisingly, all practitioners (n=7) qualified as fully engaged. Of those less engaged, 42% (n=14) qualified as *serious part-timers* and 12% (n=4) as *casual part-timers*

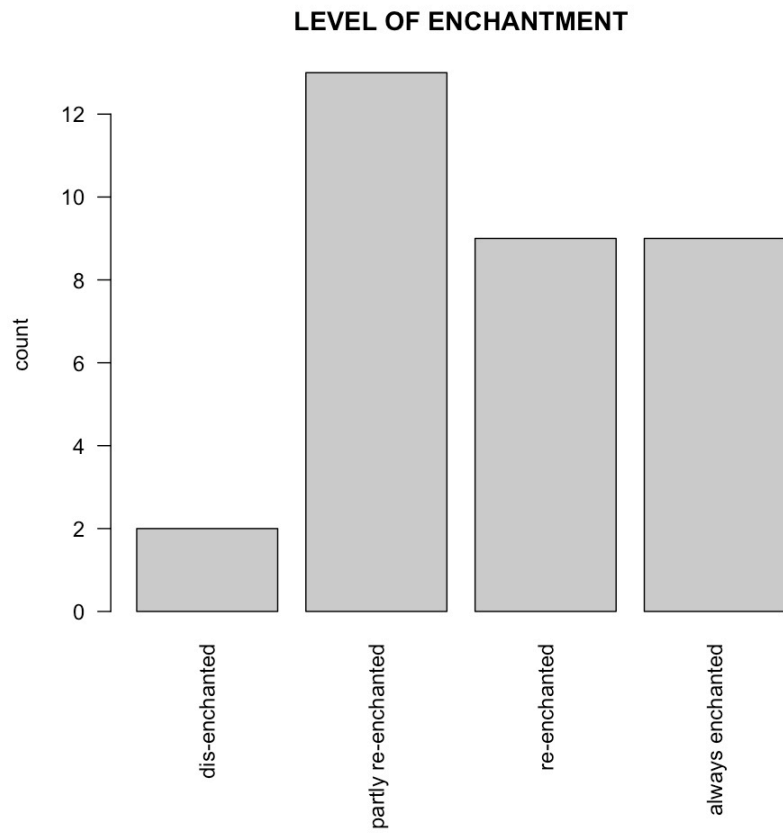


Figure 13: Level of Enchantment of Interview Sample

Only 6% (n=2) of interview participants disavow belief in an enchanted cosmos and qualified as *disenchanted*. A total of 67% (n=22) are in the process of becoming, or have become, *(re)enchanted*. And 27% of interview participants have always lived with an enchanted worldview so are categorized as *always enchanted*.

Level of Enchantment emerged from the data as a construct for analysis, and even more, as a possible theoretical frame for understanding neo-shamanism. As such, I became particularly interested in how *Level of Enchantment* is correlated to descriptive factors such as engagement, social embeddedness, and health issues and healing. *Level of Enchantment* was thus examined in relation to the following elements: 1) demographic factors, 2) number of emotional problems, 3) number of emotional healings, 4) number of physical problems, 5) number of physical healings, 6) level of social disembodiedness, 7)

level of social embeddedness, 8) number of shamanic training/traditions, and 9) level of engagement.

Using the categorical, ordinal data that emerged from the descriptive analysis of the interview data, a probability odds logistic regression (polr) analysis was completed with the statistical program R. This analysis allowed me to examine any correlations that might exist between the different descriptive categories and *Level of Enchantment*.

Probability Odds Logistic Regression Analysis Results

Through analysis it was shown that *Level of Engagement* has a positive effect on *Level of Enchantment* (estimated magnitude of the effect varies from 0.8 to 3.2 at a 95% confidence interval). Thus, in general, the more engaged with neo-shamanic activities (workshops, classes, drum circles, and healing sessions), the higher the probability that an individual is a least partly (re)enchanted (see **Figure 14**). The effect is greatest as an individual moves from being engaged as a casual part-timer to that of being a serious part-timer. It is very unlikely, then, that a serious part-timer would remain disenchanted and very likely that he/she is at least partly (re)enchanted or fully (re)enchanted. Not surprisingly, fully engaged individuals had a high probability of being either fully (re)enchanted or always enchanted. In fact, it is very unlikely that an always enchanted individual will be engaged only casually, and none of my fully enchanted interview informants were.

While all of the practitioners (people who self-identified as a neo-shamanic practitioner who actively offered healing work and mentoring, and treated clients) in my

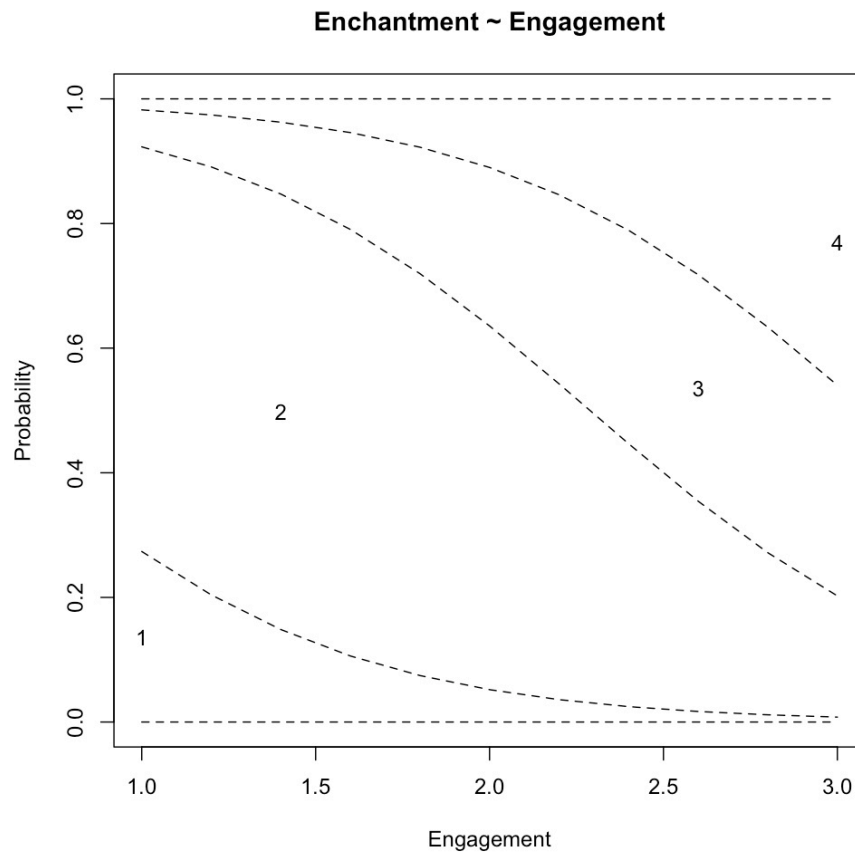


Figure 14: Level of Enchantment as Correlated with Level of Engagement

Graph interior: 1=disenchanted, 2=partly (re)enchanted, 3=(re)enchanted, 4=always enchanted.
 As level of engagement increases (horizontal axis: 1=casual part-timer, 2=serious part-timer, 3=fully engaged) the probability an individual will be (re)enchanted increases.

interview sample (n=7) were fully engaged, their *Level of Enchantment* ranged from partly (re)enchanted to being fully enchanted. Only two practitioners reported having been always enchanted. The magnitude of the correlation between being a practitioner and *Level of Enchantment* ranged from -0.5 to 2.4. So, we can conclude that there are some practitioners who are still in the process of being (re)enchanted; that is, they struggle with the tension generated from practicing and experiencing an enchanted cosmology while living in a society which privileges a disenchanting cosmology.

Of the demographic factors (sex, age, income, and education level), level of education had the only reliable correlation with *Level of Enchantment*. Age had a small effect, but that may be a proxy for education. For education, analysis showed an inverse relationship whereby increased education was correlated with decreased likelihood of a participant being (re)enchanted or always enchanted, and increased the likelihood of being in the process of (re)enchancing, or simply disenchanting (see **Figure 15**). This is not surprising, as it is expected that greater formal education in a modern system would lead to a more strongly held modern worldview. Interestingly, education did not have a significant effect on level of engagement. This would mean that higher-educated participants may be fully engaged and involved in numerous neo-shamanic activities. For these individuals in particular we might expect to see greater tension (and struggle) between their modern worldview and enchanted modern shamanic life experiences.

The number of shamanic traditions a person was involved in had no effect on *Level of Enchantment*, but did exhibit a strong negative correlation with *Level of Engagement*. This suggests that, in accordance with Heelas (1996) casual part-timers are indeed “dabblers,” and may be exploring different elements of neo-shamanism as a way

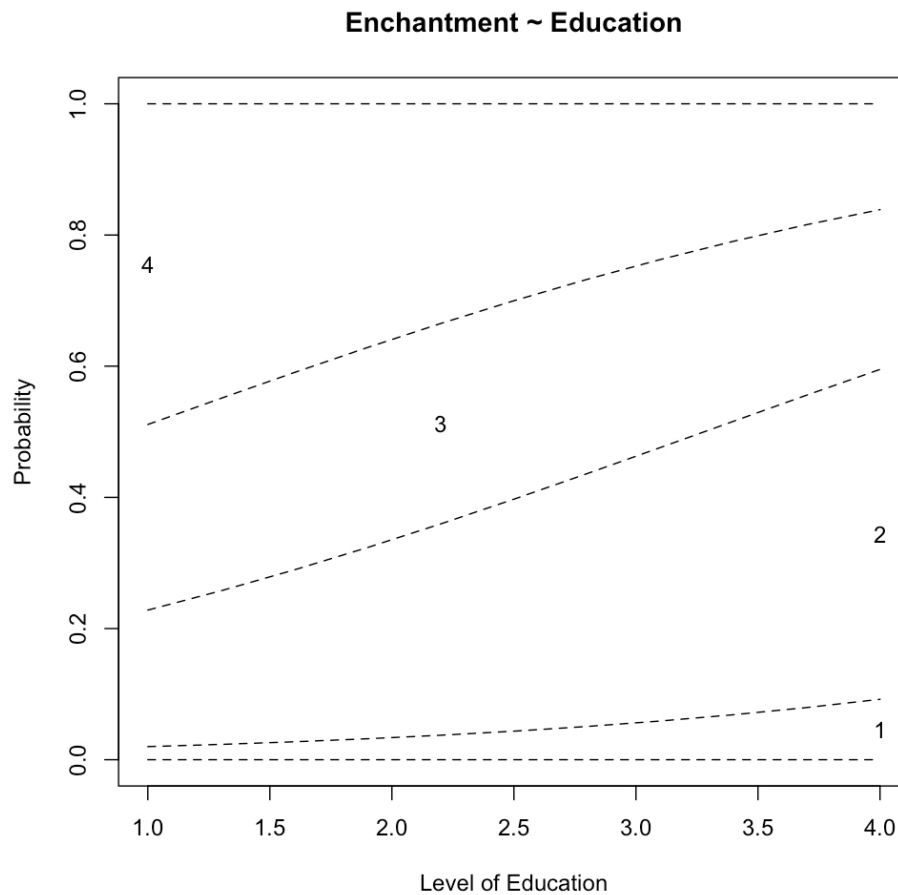


Figure 15: Level of Enchantment as Correlated with Level of Education

Graph interior: 1=disenchanted, 2=partly (re)enchanted, 3=(re)enchanted, 4=always enchanted. As level of education increases (1=high school, 5=graduate degree) the probability that an individual will be (re)enchanted decreases.

to satisfy curiosity or a “consumerist” approach to participating in New Age activities, whereas those who are serious part-timers or fully engaged in neo-shamanism have adopted a particular mindset and pursue activities that are consistent and supportive of it (see **Figure 16**).

Bivariate analysis of the health/healing descriptive data revealed that the number of emotional issues and instances of emotional healing are somewhat correlated with

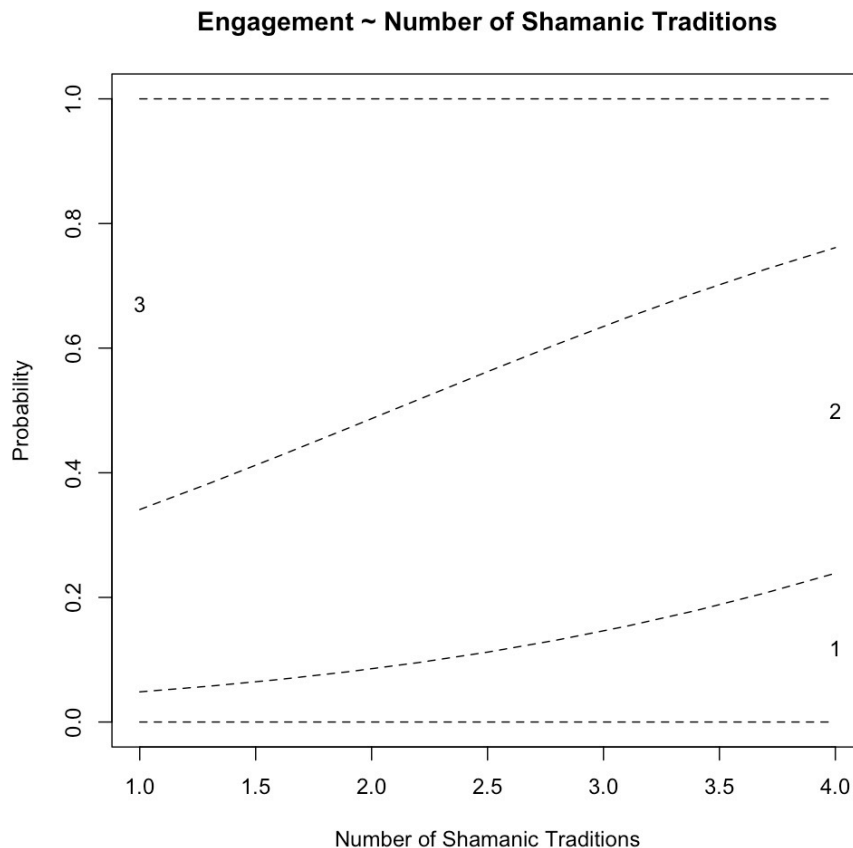


Figure16: Level of Engagement as Correlated with Number of Shamanic Traditions

Graph Interior: 1=casual part-timer, 2=serious part-timer, 3=fully engaged. As the number of neo-shamanic traditions practiced increases, the probability an individual will be engaged at either the serious part-time or fully engaged level decreases.

higher *Level of Enchantment*. While the effect is small (beta/coefficient = 0.2 and 0.2, respectively) it is focused (magnitude of the effect ranges from $-0.1 - 0.4$ and $-0.1 - 0.6$, respectively). Instances of emotional healing is more strongly correlated with level of enchantment than number of emotional problems, however when analyzed together the magnitude of the effect of emotional healing ranges from $-0.3 - 0.7$. Neither emotional issues nor healing rates impacted *Level of Engagement*, so it would seem that successful treatment of emotional issues may impact a person's worldview and belief in an

enchanted cosmos, but does not necessarily lead to greater participation in or practice of neo-shamanic activities.

In contrast to emotional healing, physical problems/healings and level of social disembeddedness/embeddedness did not have an effect on *Level of Enchantment*. Physical problems and healings had a negative association with *Level of Engagement*, that is, people with physical issues tended to participate in neo-shamanic activities less often than those that did not.

Summary of Results

The sample population for this study, as reflected through the in-depth interviews with informants, reflects participants in neo-shamanism who in the majority white females (64%) between the ages of 35-54 with college educations (39% report post-graduation education) and middle-incomes (\$25,000 - \$100,000 annual income). They have received primary shamanic training through either the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (39%) and/or the Four Winds Society (27%). A majority belong to at least one drum circle group (58%) and are engaged with two to four different neo-shamanic traditions simultaneously or over time (64%).

Virtually all of the participants recognized shamanism as an alternative healing modality, and had sought treatment for emotional, physical or social conditions. Eighty-two percent sought shamanic treatment for emotional healing and almost all of them (93%) reported healing as a result of their neo-shamanic activities. Just under half of the interviewees (49%) reported seeking shamanic healing for a physical condition and the majority (69%) reported full healing or a reduction in symptoms as a result of their neo-

shamanic activities. One individual even reported unintentional physical healing. And 52% of the participants reported seeking neo-shamanic treatment as a response to feelings of social disembeddedness. Of those, 71% report feeling more socially embedded following engagement. Additionally, 19% of those who did not present disembeddedness concerns also reported feeling more socially embedded.

Almost half (46%) of the interview participants are fully engaged in shamanic activity, which means they are deeply devoted to their involvement with neo-shamanism and participate in a variety of different activities such as drum circles, workshops, healing practices, and personal shamanic journeying. Very few of the participants remain disenchanting (only 6%) and while 27% are fully enchanted, the majority (67%) are partly- or fully (re)enchanted.

Those who engage in modern shamanism at a serious part-timer or fully engaged level, are more likely to have an enchanted worldview, as are those who pursue only one or two traditions rather than “dabbling” in a wide variety of activities. However, even among those who are fully engaged, greater levels of education are likely to dampen one’s *Level of Enchantment* and this is likely due to the inculcation in modern thinking that is at the essence of the US contemporary educational system.

Level of Enchantment is weakly correlated to emotional issues and healing, such that people who experienced some type of emotional healing were more likely to be in the process of embracing an enchanted worldview, or expressed a greater willingness to accept extra-material explanations for their experience. It would seem that this would represent a move away from a strictly modern perspective for these people. Traditional shamanism is characterized by its not modern belief in an enchanted cosmology and its

role in a greater “collective” socio-cultural system, so we might expect that shamanic experiences would lead to more traditional worldviews. However, it is interesting that so much of the focus of the emotional healing produced by neo-shamanism was in effect, on the *detraditionalized self*¹⁰ rather than the collective community—be it reports of “self-transformation,” increased “self-esteem,” greater “self-integration,” or enhanced “personal/self-power.” This reification of the self is more consistent with a modern worldview, and yet based on the data in this study, it was in healing the “self” that neo-shamanism was its most effective. As will be discussed more thoroughly in the final chapter of this dissertation, it would seem that the integration of traditional techniques (shamanism) into contemporary US society (modernity) may in fact create an *enchanted modernity* which allows for modern individuals to find enchanted healing.

Based on the data presented here, it is possible to hypothesize that there may in fact be two different types of people involved in neo-shamanism—those seeking an alternative worldview that incorporates *enchantment* and those who are simply exploring a medical/treatment alternative. The first group may be seeking a new framework for explaining their life experience, and neo-shamanism provides the experiences and framework through which they may “enchant modernity.” For the second group, perhaps, neo-shamanism is simply loosely incorporated into their existing, modern frame and perceived as some kind of modified biomedical treatment option. For them, healing efficacy through neo-shamanism may be interpreted as “alternative healthcare” and placed into similarly difficult-to-explain-but-effective treatment such as acupuncture, Reiki therapy, or cranial-sacral treatments. The negative correlation between physical

¹⁰ The *detraditionalized self* is the term used by Heelas (1996) and discussed in Chapter I to refer to the modern self disembedded from the social who seeks autonomous self-cultivation, aspires to ground identity within, and desires to exercise independence, authority, choice, and expressivity.

healing and *Level of Engagement* (and lack of relationship with *Level of Enchantment*) with shamanic activities may be reflective of this second group—who may have experienced physical healing and relief of symptoms, but this did not necessitate a change in worldview.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Enchantment

Neo-Shamanism as Framework for an Enchanted Lived Experience

There is a tension for some people in contemporary US society between their lived experience and the Western paradigm. These individuals experience their daily life as *enchanted*.¹¹ Their cosmos is animated by a life force or spirit, rich with an unseen, extra-material, spiritual, energetic reality, alongside and in addition to the material world—beyond explanation by science. The Western worldview, in direct contrast, tells them that this cannot be—only that for which there is credible, empirical, material evidence can be real. The Western cosmos is *disenchanted*, emphasizing the external, material, and measurable while pronouncing all other ways of knowing not real—illusory and worthless. The shamanic worldview, transformed for the contemporary, modern individual, provides one framework, and a language, for the enchanted lived experience of such individuals.

Von Stuckrad (2002) describes modernity as a dialectic between rational materiality and mystic experiences, suggesting that modern quests for the enchanted are

¹¹ As discussed in Chapter I, Weber (1946) suggested that modernity *disenchanted* the world, i.e., that in the process of modernity, science and rationality replaced magical means to implore the spirits, resulting in the Cartesian differentiation of matter and spirit. Neo-shamanism, ostensibly based on traditional (premodern) shamanism, rests on the premise of an *enchanted* world.

grounded in the very roots of modernity. Tanaka (2002) suggests that a moment, or kernel, of enchantment survives the process of modernity's disenchantment and states that disenchantment "throws knowledge and meaning back onto us, render[ing] us the ultimate and ineffable authors of our experience" (57)—the modern turn to the self. It is this remaining "moment" of enchantment that, in the context of modernity, creates a tension for the individual whose lived experience is enchanted.

Twenty-seven percent of the interview sample described their lived experience as always having been enchanted. These neo-shamanic practitioners and participants¹² describe their enchanted lived experiences as: "spontaneous communications from the spirit world"; "high intuitive gifts, high sensory perception"; the ability to work with the energy field, a "force that's invisible in modern society"; dreams which come true; always knowing there was "something more"; unexplained illness and/or experiences; and the ability to see spirit forms, ghosts, and energy fields around people and things. Lacking an enchanted framework for understanding their out of the ordinary experiences, these people struggle to make sense of them within a Western worldview, and state that living with them causes them to question their grip on reality. At best, these individuals are considered to have an active imagination, which implies they are living in a "frivolous and marginal nonreality" in a culture that has "worshipped facts for several centuries" and devalues personal experience (Noel 1999: 59, 124). At worst, they are insane.¹³

¹² All quotes and paraphrases from participants in this study presented in this document come from interview transcripts or field notes unless otherwise indicated. All study participant names are pseudonyms.

¹³ Indeed, traditional shamanic callings or initiations create "symptoms" which the Western worldview would label as pathology and the DSM-IV now includes "Religious and Spiritual Problems" as a diagnostic

One young female practitioner, Melanie, stated that spontaneous communications from the spirit world made her feel like she was crazy, and plunged her into a deep depression as a teen. Another, Karen (a full time practitioner), described how an unexplained coma as a child, during which she played with spirit animals and learned the topography of a nonordinary landscape, never made sense to her, and that two subsequent near death experiences plunged her also into a deep depression. Dan, also a neo-shamanic practitioner, described his experience with enchantment as being pestered by the spirit world his whole life, which made him feel crazy and led him to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol. Finally, Kelly, a young female practitioner, described herself as a “nerd” in her own culture because she had such a deep and ceremonial relationship with nature and its spirits as a child. In addition, she experienced spontaneous shamanic journeys into an extra-material reality, which she did not understand. As a teen she felt odd enough that she sought out psychiatric care, and was prescribed thirteen different medications in two years, yet found no relief. Each of these individuals then went on to say that when they were introduced to the neo-shamanic worldview, *everything suddenly made sense*. They were no longer crazy, but *enchanted*.

Estell, a seasoned practitioner and teacher of modern shamanism, expressed it this way when I asked her what brought people to her classes:

Most of the time people say to me ‘I need to have a context to put my experiences into.’ Because they’ve had these things happen. They’ve had these dreams at night. And then there are some who say ‘you know, I just feel drawn here.’ And then they recognize the reason they’re drawn here is that it’s a context for their experiences.

category. Babbling, confused words, displaying curious eating habits, singing continuously, dancing wildly, and being "tormented by spirits" are common elements in traditional shamanic initiatory crises. Stanislav Grof suggests that these ought to be treated as crises of transformation or spiritual opening (Lukoff n.d.). None of the participants in this study related experiencing these specific “symptoms,” with the exception of being “pestered by spirits.” In fact, a common neo-shamanic premise delineates between shamanic experiences and insanity, teaching that such symptoms are shamanic when they do not control an individual but can be controlled through the use of shamanic tools and techniques.

Nine times out of ten they're drawn to shamanism because they're looking for a place or way to explain prior experiences. (Estell, neo-shamanic practitioner and teacher)

Another practitioner, named Jannine, stated:

...just walking through the Monday through Friday nine to five world, there's not a lot of obvious support and recognition to develop [the gifts of shamanism]... and those gifts, I think, are inherent in every person, they're just not developed in our culture. ...shamanism provides that culture to let me validate what I'm experiencing and feeling on an intuitive level and validate that those experiences have value and they're not just imagination and they're not just 'woo woo'. (Jannine, neo-shamanic practitioner)

The tension felt by those with enchanted experience in a disenchanted world was expressed repeatedly in the shamanic workshops and classes I attended as people struggled with the idea that what they were experiencing could actually be real: "How do I know I'm not just making this up?" Interestingly, imagination is not explanation or validation enough for those struggling with enchanted experiences in a disenchanted world. Imagination's epistemological status is low in the scientific literalism of Western culture (Noel 1999) yet neo-shamanic participants sense their enchanted lived experiences are more real than mere internal images. They are looking for a framework that allows for a literally animated cosmology external to themselves, a consciousness that participates with a universe that is literally alive.

Villoldo (2000), founder of the Four Winds Society, summarizes the disenchanted worldview in three key beliefs:

The first was that all of the food in the world belonged by divine right to humans...who were masters over the animals and plants of the earth. The second belief was that humans could not speak to the rivers, to the animals, to the mountains, or to God. And the third was that human kind had to wait until the end of all time before tasting infinity. (8)

This disenchanted ethos of the West was incomprehensible to traditional shamanic societies who believed that they existed alongside of and could communicate with nature.

Although simple and straightforward at first, it becomes a trial and a burden for enchanted modern individuals as their experiences conflict with what they are taught to believe— that the material world is the only real world (Villoldo 2000). The unseen world of an enchanted cosmos cannot be seen with the logic and reason of the modern paradigm and thus results in the tension felt by enchanted individuals. At one workshop I attended, students learned that an enchanted life makes you “weird” in the Old English sense of the word, that is, belonging to the supernatural, at the same time pointing to the lack of fit with modern culture. The disenchanting assumption of modernity was reinforced not only by the principles of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, but also by the Christian church, which as a corollary, took it upon itself to rid the world of superstition and evil (Noel 1999). One might argue that the institution of religion ought to provide a framework for enchantment as well as an ontology for modern individuals. But for those, like the neo-shamanic participants in my study, for whom the universe is alive and animated with consciousness, the church falls short (see also Jakobsen 1999). Instead of a relationship of dominance over, control of, and separation from nature, they have experienced a merger with nature, and feel equal with and custodian of all of nature’s animated aspects.

The disenchanting worldview of modernity also poses an obstacle for those individuals who are in the process of becoming re-enchanted. Disenchanted individuals who have been introduced to the premises of an animated shamanic cosmos, perhaps through a quest for healing, struggle to reconcile both those premises and their new experiences with modern culture.

Neo-Shamanism as a Mechanism for Re-Enchantment

*Before doing some shamanic work I wouldn't have acknowledged any of this, or had a conversation about it. I was so in a science perspective.
(Jon, neo-shamanic participant in his 40s)*

*You know, there is no-one that I could even explain it to without them thinking I'm crazy.
(Clara, neo-shamanic participant in her 60s)*

Individuals in all societies are enculturated to agree that their society's way of seeing the world is the "right way." That agreed upon right way carries the weight of authority, and in modern society it is the Western worldview. The correctness of the particular worldview is not what is important. What matters is that it is the worldview that counts (Jordan 1997). The Western scientific paradigm—that reality is physical, observable, and measurable, and that valid knowledge comes from scientific investigation— carries more weight than other epistemological stances because it is a useful way to explain the state of the world and it is supported by a structural superiority, i.e., society's institutions are organized by and around it. As more resources are poured into those institutions, it comes to be associated with a stronger power base than other ways of explaining the world, society's key players have a vested interest in maintaining the paradigm, and it is buoyed up. The social structure of modern society rests upon the assumption that the sacred and the mundane are separate, and that science begets facts while religion yields beliefs.

When one epistemological frame is held above all others as authoritative, it gains an hegemony, discrediting other ways of knowing. The result is a lack of space for alternative viewpoints. Jordan (1997) explains it this way:

... frequently, one kind of knowledge gains ascendance and legitimacy. A consequence of the legitimation of one kind of knowing as authoritative is the devaluation, often the dismissal, of all other kinds of knowing. Those who espouse alternative knowledge systems then tend to be seen as backward, ignorant, and naïve, or worse, simply as troublemakers. Whatever they might think they have to say about the issues up for negotiation is judged irrelevant, unfounded, and not to the point. The constitution of authoritative knowledge ... both builds and reflects power relationships ... and does this in such a way that all participants come to see the current social order as a natural order, that is, the way things (obviously) are. (56)

“The way things (obviously) are.” This sense that how things are is natural and reasonable results in what Bourdieu (1984) calls the *choice of the necessary*, i.e., individuals internalize and embody the structure of the social system around them to the point that the constraints of that system become a personal preference as to how to both understand the world around them and be in it. So, for individuals in modern society, the fact of the reality of the material world is matched by a discrediting of the reality of the unseen or extra-material world and consequently individuals internalize this maxim. It structures their understanding of the world around them to the point that it is taken for granted –it is self-evident. The constraint of the modern material-only disenchanted worldview becomes a preference for how the world is, and any other way of seeing life falls outside the realm of being “thinkable.”

This creates a tension for individuals whose lived experience is in conflict with this mainstream view of things. Two-thirds of the interview sample were in some state of re-enchanting their cosmos. They report that their contact with an enchanted cosmology, whether that be a sense of communion with nature, an ecstatic experience of oneness, or a daily spiritual practice that animates their world, places them in a struggle, a conflict, with the dominant paradigm and all things associated with it. It is not simply that the Western worldview is disenchanted, but the very social structure of the West buoys up

this disenchantment through, for example, institutions, the medical system, and the language available to talk about the world and our place in it. Not only is the idea of the unseen world as being external to self and as real as the material world “unthinkable,” it is “unspeakable.” Participants in my study often expressed some relief at the end of the interview session, relief at finally having someone to talk freely with about their not-mainstream experiences and ideas: “I can’t tell anyone about this because no one would believe me, they’d think I was totally insane” (Scott, middle aged participant)

Because the Western worldview lacks enchanted language, people cast about for adequate words to describe their experiences, often qualifying their attempts with either doubt about whether this was more than their imagination or assertions of the validity of their experience—“this stuff is real!” They struggle in trying to make sense of their experiences and fear to let others know about them:

So I was seeing things other people didn’t see, and feeling things, and knowing things. So comes this: am I insane? Or what? Or is this stress from two small children very close in age and lack of sleep? What is this? (Jackie, young mother and modern shamanic participant).

I finally told my husband... about shamanism. I was told in a [shamanic] journey to tell him. Which shocked me, and it took me a while, it took me three or four weeks before I finally sat him down. I was scared. I thought he was really going to think poorly of me. You know, when you talk about animals talking to you and that. But no, it was ok. And he received it very well, he was very open about it and said ‘Thank you for sharing.’ Not that he was interested in it but that he was glad I told him. (Annette, middle-aged modern shamanic participant)

Participants of beginner workshops and classes tended to use terms such as “deep psyche,” “imagination,” and “subconsciousness” to describe the location of their shamanic journey—pointing to an internal experience. This falls onto the language readily available—a language acceptable to biomedical and conventional psychotherapy models—and is a way of describing the shamanic experience without challenging the

modern worldview. Neophytes in beginner classes and workshops often asked: “How do I know I’m not just making this up?” One workshop teacher, Barbara, responded with assertions: “This is not fantasy, not imagination. This is real.” Most, however, left it to the student to discover, saying things like “Time will tell,” “At some point you will have an experience that is so far out there you’ll realize it’s not you,” or “When you do work for a stranger, the simple explanation for the information you get is that ‘spirits are real’.” And this was born out by my study population. For example,

The first time someone asked me to do a journey for them I didn’t know about it, but then I found the information I got was right on. I can’t rationalize that away. We’ve been so trained to put it into psychological terms. All I can say is, well, I can’t explain this. (Nancy, middle-aged participant)

This is a struggle of culture. The individuals engaging in neo-shamanism are modern individuals. They did not grow up in a world of participating consciousness,¹⁴ nor embedded in the group ethos of nonWestern life. They are detraditionalized,¹⁵ individualistic, and generally both disillusioned with the religious institutions offered by society and somewhat skeptical of anything not modern. Modern attempts to explain spiritual experiences range from simple biochemical firings of the brain to deep Jungian explanations of the human psyche. These explanations are for the most part internal: that is, because the shamanic experience cannot be observed by someone else, the experience is therefore not considered real in the material, physical sense. It is, as Noel (1999) claims, imaginal. The strength of Western culture’s hegemony as experienced by Norman, an older neo-shamanic participant, is described this way:

¹⁴ *Participating consciousness* is a term used by Berman (1981) to refer to an assumed premodern merger and identification with one’s material and extra-material surroundings (discussed in Chapter I).

¹⁵ The *detraditionalized self* is the term used by Heelas (1996) and discussed in Chapter I to refer to the modern self disembedded from the social who seeks autonomous self-cultivation, aspires to ground identity within, and desires to exercise independence, authority, choice, and expressivity.

The US, up until the sixties, was pretty closed to everything but what some folks would call the ordinary, normal, reality. Anything beyond that was deviant and psychopathic. In the sixties people started experimenting with all sorts of stuff and had experiences that the mainstream didn't have. That was threatening to the majority of culture. We still see big efforts to contain it in the drug wars. ... So experiences in a not physical, not observable reality threaten our worldview, our scientific paradigm. And tied up with that are our social institutions and all the people who have something to gain from them, and the social order even. Worldview turns out to be critically important. It's like the color of the glasses we wear when we see the world. (Norman, neo-shamanic participant)

Bourdieu (1984) states:

What is at stake in the struggles about the meaning of the social world is power over the classificatory schemes and systems... the evocative power of an utterance which puts things in a different light... or which modifies the schemes of perception, shows something else, other properties, previously unnoticed or relegated to the background; a separative power, a distinction... drawing discrete units out of indivisible continuity, difference out of undifferentiated. (479).

And, he asserts, "Only in and through the struggle do the internalized limits become boundaries, barriers that have to be moved" (480). The struggle is not simple. People who have enchanted experiences while holding a (albeit unexamined) disenchanted worldview, feel vividly the disjunction between the two. Many dismiss their experiences because they fall into the realm of the "unthinkable." Most do not tell anyone about them, for fear of being marginalized and thought a dupe, frivolous, or insane. However, it is in the experience that does not fit with the mainstream worldview that individuals begin to sense its limitations, and the edges of their culture:

One of the biggest awakenings you can have along the way is that everything you do, smell, taste, no matter how much you hate it or love it is your culture. You cannot escape it. If you want to try to escape it the first step is to simply see it, how huge it is. It's hard for anybody to see their own culture. It's big, and most people have some degree of comfort in their own culture, so they have no real reason to see it for what it is. (Norman, neo-shamanic participant)

Enchanted experiences in a disenchanted frame are discomfoting. Some individuals, due to either their desire for a felt sense of the sacred or their unexplainable

experiences, find themselves becoming aware of the limitations of the previously unquestioned Western assumption that the universe is material and inanimate. The unthinkable is experienced, thus thinkable, and they begin to find words for the “unspeakable.” As individuals engage with the modern practice of shamanism over time, and experience nonordinary reality more regularly and more vividly, their language around that experience tends to align with the enchanted and animated cosmology of neo-shamanism. This was evident in the neo-shamanic classes and circles I participated in. The classes met once a week, for a period of 8 weeks, while the circles I was involved with met twice a month for between 4 and 12 months. These gave me the opportunity to observe neo-shamanic participants over time. I noted that after a few weeks or months of regular engagement with modern shamanic tools and techniques, group members increasingly reframed what they had previously labeled coincidences as synchronicities, had more consistent success with the shamanic journey, reported more clarity in the shamanic (altered) state of consciousness, and reported using shamanism in their daily lives to solve problems, such as help locate lost objects. Increasingly, participants stop qualifying or defending their experiences and no longer try to make them fit with a modern worldview. They begin to adopt a neo-shamanic worldview, becoming resigned to the ineffable nature of their lived experience: “Well, I think if we explain it all the mystery will go away. People want to verify it but that’s not what I’m trying to do.” (Jannine, neo-shamanic practitioner)

In the main, however, what I observed, was an ongoing struggle for individuals, groups, and neo-shamanic teachers to trust the neo-shamanic worldview, i.e., that their experiential engagement in an animated universe was real and external to themselves.

And so, we are left with the fact that, in contrast to people whose lived experiences have always been enchanted and find in neo-shamanism an explanatory framework for their lives, many individuals who engage in the practice of modern shamanism find themselves in the process of re-enchanted their cosmos.

This study found that, in general, the more engaged with neo-shamanic activities a person is, the higher the probability that they are at least partly, if not fully, (re)enchanted. This study also found that the more educated an individual was, the less likely they were to be fully (re)enchanted. Individuals with higher education have had their disenchanted assumptions of the world reinforced formally and may therefore find acceptance of the unseen and their experiential engagement with it as external to themselves more difficult. Fuller (2005) states that educated people increasingly find that religious beliefs are no longer compelling –“that we can usually get along without them, that they no longer speak to our experience, and they pale by comparison to the great advances being made by scientific thought” (120). Yet, while education “put the brakes on” (re)enchantment, it is not a barrier to it, for while this study population was in the majority more educated than the general population, only 6% of interviewees remained disenchanted.

The struggle with accepting enchanted experience is in line with the difficulty many modern individuals have sustaining belief in religion, or indeed, even being open to the idea of the metaphysical. Recall that, as discussed in Chapter III, in order for people to be open to spiritual experiences, those experiences need to be feasible, be something to which they cannot be indifferent, and be significant, life changing, not trivial, that is, a genuine intellectual option (James 1907).

[After being disappointed with religion when I was younger I decided] I would not believe in anything unless I experienced it and it was reasonable. Not that it had to be intellectual. I don't have to be able to explain things. But some things sound silly when we talk about them because we don't have the anchors in our culture.
(Anthony, neo-shamanic participant)

While Fuller argues that alternative healing rituals provide the existential encounters that “suddenly opens their eyes to the momentous differences that ‘being spiritual’ can make in our lives” (Fuller 2001: 121), the results of my interviews suggest that healing experiences are not enough. While participants described their “opened eyes” due to encounters with modern shamanic healing sessions, these sessions in and of themselves were not necessarily enough to re-enchant their world. For one older woman, Clara, a modern shamanic healing session was just a first, simple acknowledgment that her physical and emotional bodies were, indeed, connected:

I would never have connected my mind and body had I not gone through these [shamanic healing] experiences. I probably would have just always thought I was coping and getting through the day—but I would have always had a sore back. When I was getting my gums cut and having a hysterectomy and back and migraine I would have never ever connected that had something to do with emotional well-being.
(Clara, neo-shamanic participant)

She was intrigued enough by her resulting shift in perception to learn more about the modern use of shamanism by enrolling in an eight-week experiential course. Collin, a middle-aged male modern shamanic practitioner, recalls the impact of his first neo-shamanic healing session:

[A friend] recommended that I go see [this shamanic practitioner]. So I went, but I didn't really know what I was even going to, so I went to the first session and she did an illumination on me. Even that first day I felt some shifts occurred. Then, she had me come over and visit with another friend. We sat there and they were tracking me and decided that I needed a cord cutting ceremony, because I had a lot of cords attached to both my family and the relationship I was in that had ended. Well, it was a much deeper thing that that really, it had to do with a lot more than just the relationships, there was more stuff going on. After she did the cord cutting ceremony I felt like I do now, just totally normal, and then, all of a sudden I felt like I was going

to pass out after she cut the last cord and I was like ‘gee I think I’m going to pass out’ and I laid down and I went out for a like a few minutes, I mean, I wasn’t totally dead to the world, but basically down. What happened is that those cords were where I was gaining my energy. So all of a sudden all of these thing were cut and Ugh! All of a sudden the energizer bunny was out! And so I had to go through a little healing work myself and rebuilding, so that I had everything in myself that I needed—the feminine and the masculine and all the parts and all that. (Collin, neo-shamanic practitioner)

Collin was astounded by the connection of what was described to him as “energetic cords” between himself and other people (unseen), the use of modern shamanic tools to cut those cords (unseen), and the very physical reaction of his body (observable). It is experiences like these that anchor the unseen into the physical and turn the modern shamanic cosmology into a genuine option for those experiencing them.

Study participants reported that watershed shamanic experiences, such as when information sought for a stranger ends up being “right on” or healing work done for somebody has a measurable effect, helped make enchantment a genuine option. In the main, however, people wavered between doubt about the reality of their experiences and acceptance of an enchanted world in which exists an unseen, extra-material reality in addition to and alongside the material world. Mostly, they were hung up about their imagination, i.e., they continued to struggle with the dichotomy of classifying their experiences as real or “just their imagination.”

Noel (2000) calls for an imaginal modern shamanism – an effort to regain our ability to imagine. He disparages modern shamanism as a Western Fantasy, suggesting that any literalization of traditional ways is a farce, and characterizes neo-shamanic journeys as “passive, unconscious fantasies” (Noel 1999:179). His imaginal shamanism calls on “the imaginal power of the psyche, the lost ‘soul’ of the West and of its modern seekers, to be rediscovered and recovered in acts and arts of shamanic imagining” (Noel

1999:121). He suggests that neo-shamanism has a role to play in contemporary society, but only as a way to develop the psychological power of the imagination.

However, Noel's take on modern shamanism as imaginal stands in conflict with the premise related to me over and over again during the course of this study that modern shamanic participants engage with an *extra-material* reality *external* to themselves. After all, it is not that we cannot imagine at all, let alone imagine an animated universe. We are both surrounded by and in some sort of fascinated love affair with the magic of talking animals, walking trees, and magic travel in contemporary cartoons, films, video games, and books (Douthat 2009). We are sold commodities through advertisements that attach magical properties to the items for sale (Lau 2000). We moderns are, paradoxically, immersed in a world where we can pretend that the world is not a mechanistic flatland. The anchor for us is that we, like Noel, *know that it is just pretend*, and in that way, imagination can reside within disenchantment. We don't really expect a forest to start throwing apples at us, as in the classic The Wizard of Oz, or the creatures in a child's book to show up at the door, as happens in the film Where the Wild Things Are. Nor do we really think tall blue people live an ideal and peaceful life in neurologically connected harmony with their planet as in the current Hollywood money-maker Avatar. Again: we know it is not real. The crux of the struggle in a disenchanted modern worldview is to entertain the modern shamanic idea that what we call imagination just might exist external to ourselves –it might indeed be real.

One modern shamanic teaching, as presented at a shamanic class I attended, suggests that we interact with the universe on four levels: the literal, the symbolic, the

mythical, and the energetic.¹⁶ The literal level refers to the physical world, the symbolic to our cognition of our experience in it, the mythic to our culture's metaphor and story for both the world and our place in it, and the energetic to the unseen, spiritual, or shamanic realm. In the West we are comfortable in the literal, rely on the symbolic, and are accustomed to the mythic level even if we are not overtly aware of it, using story and metaphor to understand the world around us. We do not, however, necessarily find the energetic level very accessible or relevant. This is the area where magic happens, and we, in the West, learn that it is "just pretend." A student in the class remarked that because the teachings relied heavily on other-culture's symbols, like animals of the jungle and spiritual figures from indigenous groups, it felt a lot like a religion. The teacher, Steve, responded that we were trapped by the fact that our own (modern) culture does not have a way to talk about the energetic, or spiritual, and so we borrow symbols to try to put it in words.

As previously mentioned, talking about encounters with the spiritual as if it were externally real is suspect in modern society. Science provides one way for modern shamanic participants to talk about this: quantum mechanics. Neo-shamanic teachers at some of the workshops and classes I attended referred to the science of quantum mechanics, which has been made accessible to the public through forums such as the television series The Elegant Universe by NOVA, to either explain or try to lend credibility to the "out of space and time" nonordinary, extra-material experience of the neo-shamanic journey. These teachers use science as a validating platform for the premises of an extra-material reality, and by doing so demonstrate the tension between

¹⁶ This schema is promoted by Alberto Villoldo (2000), founder of the Four Winds Society. The four levels (Literal, Symbolic, Mythic, Energetic) correspond to four "representations" (body, mind, soul, spirit) and four "languages" (words, word and images, ritual and ceremony, pure energy).

enchantment and disenchantment: i.e., claiming experience with an extra-material cosmos unexplainable by a Western, modern worldview while at the same time appealing to that same worldview seems a contradiction. Indeed, while quantum mechanics as a framework for experiential encounters with the energetic may make the external-to-self reality of those encounters a genuine option for the educated—it falls flat in the following sense. Those participants in my research whose life experience is fully enchanted do not express the need to have that enchanted cosmos fit into a scientific frame. For them, science becomes *just one way of many* to understand the world, or, more precisely, it is simply the material signature of a multidimensional and extra-material *enchanted* cosmos. However, it is exactly at the border of enchantment and disenchantment that many, if not most, of the participants in my study reside. They dance, if you will, between their enculturated modern view of the universe, which insists on the material, and their experienced enchantment of that universe.

The struggle, to recall Bordieu (1984), comes when individuals' experiential engagement with the unseen “puts things in a different light... modifies the schemes of perception, shows something else, other properties, previously unnoticed or relegated to the background” (479). We can, and indeed do, imagine an animated universe, but it is the direct experience of it that is truly enchanting. It is Fuller's felt sense of the sacred and Eliade's ecstasy. It goes beyond the idea and images of animals who talk, trees that walk, and iconic spiritual teachers, to a sense of connectedness, communion, or oneness with the life energy of the universe (Glass-Coffin 2009). Harner (1980) states that it is a desire for a “two-way spiritual communication [with nature] that resurrects the lost connections our human ancestors had with the awesome spiritual power and beauty of

our garden Earth”(xi-xiii). We want, he suggests, to reclaim Berman’s (1981) so-called participating consciousness of premodern society.

The modern individual has learned to see self as an entity separate from everything else, even from the molecules we breathe and eat, and has become isolated from the natural world. The modern agenda has been to control, not commune with, nature. Contemporary society does not offer many chances to experience Nature as itself, as people go from house to car to office to store to car to house again. There may be trees, grass, flowers, and hedges, but they are the domesticated version of nature one can find in our cities and suburbs, or the productive use of nature found on our rural farms. Undomesticated nature, or *salka*, is not available to most. The modern separation of society from nature (Latour 1993) results in a shallow reckoning, which equates manicured lawns and flowerbeds with nature. Hannah, a middle aged woman, has worked with a Peruvian shaman out in nature, both in US and Peru, and contrasts those experiences with her participation in a modern shamanic workshop about nature:

So, I’m coming from the idea of sitting with the mountain or river or desert or whatever, where we happened to be, to come back to *salka*....[which] means wild or undomesticated energy. Into the wild places and we are drawn to those places... So the workshop, in a conference room, in a building, on a campus and we’re going to lie down on a blanket and connect with the spirits in nature. I don’t know. We’d come up with a ritual or something and we’d go outside and dance around in a circle and then chant and touch a tree. And to me it was very artificial. On a manicured lawn. But the other people at the workshop seemed to be happy with whatever ritual we’d come up with. (Hannah, neo-shamanic participant)

Indeed, can modern individuals in contemporary society become enchanted? One study participant, Norman, offers the perspective (borne of the combination of his education, time spent with indigenous peoples, and his engagement in modern shamanism) that by the very fact that we are modern we cannot experience the world as enchanted.

I don't believe, if I'm honest, that neo-shamanism has enchanted the worldview of anyone I've ever met. Not in comparison to people in indigenous cultures. If I asked the question of neo-shamans today, yes, we all journey, but in an ordinary day, when you walk down the street, are you aware of the spirits of the land around you? Are you able to see them? Are you able to switch to what some people call shamanic vision and see them? Are they real to you, as real to you in ordinary reality as they are in non-ordinary reality? I've never found anybody that I trusted that their answer was yes. And the answer for me is 'No'. I'm able to shift rather easily, and I can journey or what we call bilocate. But I don't see the spirits of the trees out there in ordinary reality, nor do I have a sense of them beyond the sense of nature that I have. (Norman, neo-shamanic participant)

This raises the issue that the experience of enchantment by individuals in the modern world is not the same as the experience of enchantment by peoples living in what are termed traditional cultures— i.e., those who have retained a non-Cartesian understanding and experience of the cosmos. A common experience for the people who took part in my research was the struggle with the idea that the extra-material enchanted experiences they had were *really* real. Recall that the Cartesian premise of modern life, i.e., the differentiation of matter and spirit, is written into the language available to Western individuals to describe the experiences of modern shamanism, and tends to the interior, psychological, and imaginal.

Neo-shamanism does not flow from the worldview of contemporary culture as does traditional shamanism from traditional culture. Modernity is disenchanting. Allow me to restate: the modern individual has learned to see self as an entity separate from everything else, even from the molecules we breathe and eat. In contrast, shamanism, traditional and modern, is premised upon an enchanted world that assumes a connection between the material and the spiritual, the seen and the unseen—a human-spirit connection (Glass-Coffin 2009).

My experience living in Pokhara, Nepal, and observing and participating in Nepali and Tibetan shamanic healing sessions there, provides interesting context for the (re)enchantment of the modern individual. I came to this opportunity through one of my key informants, Karen. She has lived the fall season in Nepal for the past 10 years, and I traveled to Nepal with her in the fall of 2008 to see the Nepali and Tibetan healers there.

What I saw in Nepal was a people whose every minute was enchanted, and enchanted without question. Spirits of ancestors, the household, the community, and particular geographic places, as well as deities both Hindu and Buddhist permeated everyday life, experience, and society. Life, while overwhelmingly full of the mundane chores of daily living in one of the poorest countries on earth, revolved around behaviors, rituals, and ceremonies designed to maintain good relations with the pantheon of the extra-material world. The crux is that the relationship with the unseen is crucial to maintaining life and the health of both the individual and the group in this traditional society.

During my time in Nepal, I observed people presenting illness and bad luck—physical, psychological, and social—to Nepali *jhankris* (shamans) and Tibetan *lhapas* (shamans) for healing and resolution. And I, too, brought my physical ills to them. In my most striking healing experience, I arrived at Bel's home (the *jhankri* I spent the most time with) with an upset gut—nausea and diarrhea, not uncommon for the newly arrived traveler. We sat face to face on the floor of his healing room as he undertook his shamanic journey, chanting and brushing me with a small broom. Within an hour I was no longer sick, and able, gratefully, to eat a full meal of *dahl bhat* with his family. Healing was taken at face value, and the interaction with the extra-material realm was

ordinary. In two months of living immersed in the enchanted Nepali culture, I heard no-one express his or her healing sessions or the enchanted cosmos as an inner psychological experience—as imaginal. It simply was their way of living and healing.

I also experienced the extra-material spirits of a geographical location in a very material way during my participation in *gufa*, an all night initiation ritual in which Nepali *jhankris* master the spirits of a place in order to harness their power for healing work. Through a series of events I found myself with Karen, side-by-side with Nepali *jhankris*-in-training in Bel's home village. Bel's village is located in the hills a few hours of rough driving from Pokhara, and is a subsistence level agricultural village. They had just been hooked up to the electric grid 10 days before our arrival, and Karen and I were the first foreigners ever to visit.

Our task in the village, as *gufa* initiates, after days of preparation and fasting, preceded by weekly preparatory trips to various deity shrines in Pokhara to make offerings for a “good *gufa*,” was to sit in caves all night, meeting and mastering the spirits there. This entire experience, aside from a latrine built for just for us, did not cater to the Western individual. I admit I was somewhat disoriented and rather unsure of my task while sitting *gufa*, outside of “stay up all night and meet the spirits,” and I'm sure much was lost in translation (the villagers spoke Magar, which was translated first into Nepali, and then in bits and pieces into English). But, I managed the task as best I could and was pleased with myself for staying awake the full night, without incident.

However, the next day, amidst the celebration of the villagers for this important spiritual work (the fact that the initiates and healers “sat *gufa*” in their caves was auspicious for the villagers) I found myself suddenly in need of a quiet place to lie down.

Traditional Nepal is not a society of the individual or solitary behavior, so my only recourse was to settle in among the bags and backpacks we had brought, turn my back to the crowd, and pull my hood up over my head. Moments after finding this little spot of “privacy” I noticed my right arm was moving in a jerking fashion and I was unable to control it. I was also suddenly too weak to get up and ask for help, so I waited, wishing someone would notice the movement and come over to help me. Eventually, Karen found me and rushed to get Bel. They pulled me up to sitting. At this point I was physically weak, I felt a rush of heat into my head, and my arm and then my leg moved involuntarily. The muscles in the left side of my face were tight, pulled down and contorted grotesquely. I was, frankly, scared out of my wits. My mind was clear, but my body was not under my control.

Now, I had experienced involuntary jerking movements of my limbs before in modern shamanic journeys, when I was in a deep trance. But in those instances I had purposefully entered the trance state and was aware that the movement was a side-effect of it. I had always felt safe in the knowledge that I could come out of the shamanic trance at any time. That is, after all, one of the purposes of modern shamanic training—to control the shamanic journey, or trance experience. This time, in Nepal, I was not in a trance state, and I was not in control of my experience. I was not engaging with it, it was happening *to me*.

Bel worked on me, chanting and brushing my body with a bundle of leaves, while the other *jhankris* and initiates watched. After some time I felt the involuntary, uncontrollable movements subside, the muscles in my face relax, and, in the best way I can describe it, the intense heat I felt in my body pushed out by a cool refreshing wave.

After some hours, and some additional treatments from Bel, I found myself back to normal.

A few things strike me about this experience. One was that this physical experience happened *to* me, it was out of my control. While it resembled experiences I'd had while engaging in modern shamanic activities, it was significantly different in that I was not in an altered state of consciousness, not undertaking a shamanic journey at the time, and I was not able to stop it from happening and progressing. I was, in the enchanted cosmos of the Nepali people, being attacked by one of the spirits of the caves. This brings me to the second thing that strikes me: it was very troubling to the people of the village and they were in high concern for my health and safety. It was not merely something happening to a discrete individual (me), but an experience that involved each of them and the health and safety of the village as a whole. Their worldview premises real spirits who have a very real and immediate impact on their daily lives. Therefore, my recovery was vital to the continued health and prosperity of their group.

The third and final thing that strikes me is that Bel and the other *jhankris* did not place this experience in the context of any psychosomatic reaction or response to *gufa* or any deep personal subconscious imaginal experience I may have had. They firmly and unequivocally attributed what had happened to me to attack by a spirit of the caves in which we had sat *gufa* and explained to me that it was deadly serious: without Bel's timely intervention I would have become paralyzed and eventually died. They explained that any time anyone engages the spirits for good (healing work) there is a contingent of spirit power that fights against it. I was caught in that place between the use of the human-spirit connection for good and bad, plain and simple. And, I was healed. I was

OK. They were not worried I would have lingering issues because their healing modality, their shamanic practice, has the tools needed to apply to the spiritual attack I'd experienced. I was having an enchanted experience in an enchanted society, and they knew how to respond to it.

The Cartesian line drawn between matter and spirit in the modern worldview is as unreal to them as it is real to us. I repeat, there is no tension between enchanted experience and the wider societal context for the people I observed and worked with in Nepal. They experience the extra-material world in a material sense as a matter of course. This places shamanism as applied in modern society in a novel space: experiencing the extra-material world in a societal context that does not allow for its reality or its material expression. Neo-shamanism is a reworking and application of a pre-Cartesian system into a Cartesian framework—resulting in tension and struggle for those who choose to engage in it and become enchanted in a disenchanted world. Many of the individuals who participated in my research about neo-shamanism indicated that they were at varying levels of re-enchantment, playing with the dynamic process of balancing their modern, detraditionalized, secularized self with enchanted, magical, unexplainable experiences.

Anchors for Enchantment

The animated universe and participating consciousness which are taken to be essential to traditional shamanic cultures are key elements in the modern shamanic cosmology and can serve as a framework for experiences not able to be explained by modern culture. The (neo)shamanic cosmos is enchanted. It is literally alive. Modern

shamanic teachers in the workshops and classes I attended phrased this as follows: “Everything that is, is alive!” “The Earth is a being,” and “Everything is alive, grounded in consciousness.” For example, in popular neo-shamanic books and beginning workshops nonordinary reality is presented as real, with a topography and geography that can be learned (Harner 1980; Ingerman 2004; Wesselman 2003; field notes). In fact, two leading schools of neo-shamanism, the Foundation for Shamanic Studies and the Four Winds Society, teach their students to enter nonordinary reality from a place they are familiar with in ordinary reality—that is, as they begin a shamanic journey, they must hold in their mind a place in the material world that they have physically been to like a cave, tree, or lake. In this way neo-shamanism literalizes enchanted lived experience.

The anthropological literature is rife with descriptions of the dual nature of shamanic places, activities, and tools that serve as bridges between the material and extra-material worlds (see Atkinson 1989, Glass-Coffin 1998; Harner 1972, Joralemon & Sharon 1993, Katz 1982, Kiev 1968, LaBarre 1969, Laderman 1991, Meyerhoff 1974, and Sharon 1978). In many accounts, the traditional shaman uses material objects that are imbued with spiritual significance, power, or life. Walker (2009) states:

Shamanism mediates the material and metaphysical worlds. As imperfect mirror images, these two worlds need to be in balance, and they animate and inspire one another. The shaman merges with spirits in shamanic ritual, and thus ‘remembers’ them, giving form to the formless. In return, the shaman and the shaman’s paraphernalia are invested with the power, life force or sentience of spirits (including ancestral shamans). (10)

This is especially evident in the shaman’s *mesa* as described by Glass-Coffin (1998) and Joralemon and Sharon (1993). The *mesa* is an animated workspace, including

objects used in shamanic practice.¹⁷ In Northern Peru, this “curer’s altar” is portable, and consists of objects and staffs which have been imbued with specific spiritual forms. As represented in the literature, these objects hold symbolic and ritual significance, but for the shaman (or *curandero*) the power of these objects is more than symbolic. They are alive, animated with a spiritual force external to the material world. The *curandero* has nurtured relationships with these animated objects and utilizes them in his or her healing ceremonies.

As with traditional shamans, the nonimaginal, literal, animated reality of the enchanted experience is anchored in the material world through power objects, places, and the *mesa* for the neo-shaman as well (Harner 1980; Villoldo 2000). The neo-shamanic practitioners who took part in my study employed *mesas*, that is, animated workspaces and shamanic objects. The enchanted nature of the neo-shaman’s lived experience is evident in the dual nature of the *mesa* items: material items represent and manifest forms in nonordinary reality and forms in nonordinary reality use material items to manifest themselves in ordinary reality. Material items, such as rocks, shells, bones, and figurines, thus serve as a bridge between the mundane and the sacred. They are an anchor between the material and unseen worlds between which the neo-shaman mediates.

Recall that in a cosmology of participating consciousness “...rocks, trees, rivers, and clouds were all seen as wondrous, alive ... A member of this cosmos was ... a direct participant in its drama” (Berman 1981: 16). Not only are living beings sentient and

¹⁷ While *mesa* is a specific cultural term referring to the spiritual altar of the traditional northern Peruvian shamanic practitioner as described by Glass-Coffin (1998) and Joralemon and Sharon (1993), I use it to refer to any dedicated, animated curing space or altar used by modern shamanic practitioners and participants.

animated with spirit, but also what the West considers inanimate objects, like rocks, rivers and clouds: “Everything that is, is alive!” One modern shamanic practitioner and teacher, Teresa, teaches that objects “carry in their nature all the wisdom and power that have come across them in their existence.” This echoes the evidence that traditional shamans used sacred objects in bridging the material and spiritual realms:

Collapsing the dichotomy between object (material thing) and spirit (intelligent but immaterial being), sacred objects symbolize and embody the connection between humans and spirits and can help guide ancestral spirits to where they are needed (Walker 2009: 10)

Similarly, in the illumination process outlined by Villoldo (2000) in his book *Shaman, Healer, Sage*, and which I have observed and experienced, the imprint of a person’s disease is blown into a stone picked from the neo-shaman’s *mesa*. Each *mesa* stone is the physical manifestation of the healer’s training and own healing. It is informed by its role in the healer’s process and can then “volunteer” to help the patient. *Mesa* stones are imbued with nonordinary healing power, and serve as a bridge between the ordinary and extra-material worlds. It is the mechanism by which the spirit world can impact the material one.

My *mesa* carries a particular life vibration and that vibration is high because of where it comes from and the intention I have put into it. It has a spirit, a conscious spirit, and it’s allowing me to experience it. When I’m using my *mesa* in a healing session with a reverence that honors and supports life, I feel like it’s a mirror, a reflection of the love and light I’m bringing forward and I’m a reflection of the love and light and the beautiful intentions that the *mesa* brings forward—its lineage. It’s like, wow, I really see you and thank you. It’s such a blessing that you’re here. (Jannine, neo-shamanic practitioner)

Places of power also serve to bridge the material and spiritual worlds of the enchanted life, demonstrating how ordinary and nonordinary reality overlap. Walker (2009) relays the experience of a young American photographer filming in the mountains

of Mongolia. He did not ask permission to film because he didn't "see anyone around." What he failed to understand is that the "empty" landscape was in fact inhabited and peopled with spirits. He is an example of a disenchanted individual visiting an enchanted world: he is a modern individual from the West, which does not recognize the animated nature of the landscape. This is the flip side of enchanted Westerners living in a disenchanted society: Western individuals who are enchanted, that is, experience the landscape as animated, find themselves at a loss to understand that experience in the framework provided by their Western culture.

Neo-shamanism, in offering a frame for enchantment, recognizes that there are animated, geographical, power spots. As with the traditional shaman's ordinary, yet enchanted, landscape, the neo-shaman's landscape is imbued with power. Neo-shamanic participants are encouraged, in workshops and classes, to find their own geographic place of power, a place to experience that thinner veil between the worlds, and to be rejuvenated by the spirits. For example, in one ongoing class on modern shamanic practice, the over-arching theme was to find and connect with a sense of place. Estell, the teacher, suggested that each individual's relationship to the earth was a primary relationship and that a relationship with a place is life enhancing. She then guided the class to undertake a shamanic journey, and ask their spirit guides to show them such a place in the ordinary world. A place of power. Alexis, a young female participant, described her experience to the class:

Wow. That was a cool journey. I was tiny. I went down to the Lower World and I was tiny. So small I was afraid I'd get lost. And my Power Animal was huge! I spoke my intent to be shown a place of power for me and suddenly I was at the trailhead in the foothills. Running. There were a lot of birds. I was climbing up a hill and then I was flying with Eagle. We flew along the trails! I could see that this is a

holy place. Each tree supports me. No wonder I always feel so good after I run there. (Alexis, neo-shamanic participant)

Humans, too, can serve as the bridge between the worlds, anchoring the enchanted cosmos in material reality. Neo-shamanic participants are taught that spirits need humans in order to do work in material reality. They are encouraged to “dance” their spirit animal helpers, and to eat plants and food that the spirits like—thus “feeding them” in nonordinary reality. By doing so, nonmaterial forms gain access to and can experience the material world. Thus, humans can use their own bodies to bring the spirit into the material world—to be a bridge between the worlds. This honors the spirits. Karen (full-time neo-shamanic practitioner) feeds her helping spirits in a daily ritual, to honor and sustain them, and to maintain her relationship with them so that they will continue to work with her in her healing practice. In order to feed them she leaves food and water at designated spots on her property and in her sacred space (her *mesa*).

Everything here I think has a spirit and it’s very much alive and very much imbued and is busy working in non-ordinary reality on my behalf, or on behalf of someone else, and so I actively interact with them and feed them. (Karen, neo-shamanic practitioner)

If she is physically absent, she will undertake a shaman’s journey to her home and office and feed the spirits in the nonordinary world.

Neo-shamanism anchors enchanted experiences into the material world, bridging ordinary and nonordinary realities. This, coupled with an enchanted cosmos which presumes that all things have consciousness and that there is an extra-material reality as valid as the material, serves to frame the enchanted lived experience of some individuals and is a mechanism for re-enchancing the world for others. For those who participated in this study, neo-shamanism provides relief from the tension generated by the disjunction

between their lived experience and the Western paradigm. Rather than simply living at odds with the disenchanting nature of modern society, they have found a way in which to enchant it.

Neo-Shamanism as a Healing System

In state societies, alternative medical systems or health movements often exhibit counterhegemonic elements that resist, often in subtle forms, the elitist, hierarchical, bureaucratic, and iatrogenic aspects of biomedicine (Baer 2004:x)

*The healing is really the starting point. You have to take responsibility, that's what life is, life is responsibility. You have to step up to the plate and play your role. Allowing other people to dictate your path in life—looking to others for the answers—is not going to get you anywhere. I'm not talking about materialistically. You're going to basically be living out someone else's idea of your life. It's going to be the difference between a line drawing of someone and an actual picture.
(Anthony, neo-shamanic participant)*

CAM: Complementary and Alternative Medicine

Alternatives to biomedicine are many and diverse, ranging from those accepted as professional to those considered quackery by the biomedical hegemony. They are used singularly, in combination, and often in conjunction with biomedicine, and they include, but are not limited to, chiropractic, acupuncture, biofeedback, homeopathy, self-help, diet, nutritional supplements, energy medicine, hypnosis, and spiritual healing (Eisenberg et al. 1997; Pizzorno 2002).

Eisenberg and colleagues (1993, 1998) found alternative medicines to be popular in the US. They report that between 1990-1997 alternatives to biomedicine were used by between 32-54% of the US population, in a wide range of socio-demographic groups (Eisenberg et al. 1998: 1571). They found that individuals aged 35-49, with some college

education, and annual incomes over \$50,000 were more likely to use alternative medicines, than those older or younger, with no college education, and incomes below \$50,000/year (Eisenberg et al. 1998: 1571). They also found that use was more common among women than men (48.9% vs 37.8%), and among those who live in the western US than elsewhere (Eisenberg et al. 1998: 1571). Fifty-eight percent of individuals who used alternatives to biomedicine paid all the costs out-of-pocket, spending an estimated \$34 billion in 1997, which exceeds out-of-pocket expenditures for all US hospitalizations and physician services in the same year (Eisenberg et al. 1998: 1573). This figure stands today (NCCAM 2009: 1). According to the Eisenberg et al. (1998) findings, individuals sought alternative to biomedical therapies for the following principal medical conditions: back problems, allergies, fatigue, arthritis, headaches, neck problems, high blood pressure, sprains or strains, insomnia, lung problems, skin problems, digestive problems, depression, and anxiety. Of these, lung problems, skin problems, depression and anxiety are the conditions in which individuals reported most commonly seeking spiritual healing, imagery, and energy healing, healing modality categories into which neo-shamanism might well fit. Overall, 42% of alternative therapies were used to treat an existing illness, 58% to prevent illness or maintain health (Eisenberg et al. 1998: 1575).

Participants in the research reported here follow the demographic trends described by Eisenberg and colleagues. While they tend to be middle class, middle age, educated, and female, they represent a wide range of socio-demographic groups. The majority of individuals (82% of interviewees) sought modern shamanic healing for emotional issues such as depression, feeling “stuck,” abuse and sexual abuse trauma, relationship problems, and addiction. About half of them (49% of interviewees) sought relief for

physical problems, especially of a chronic nature, such as Multiple Sclerosis, chronic pain, cancer, and fatigue. A few reported using neo-shamanism to remedy acute problems such as fever, flu, and headaches.

The National Center for Health Statistics recently reported similar findings about the use of alternative medicines in the US in terms of demographics and the health conditions that prompt CAM use (Barnes et al. 2008). This report states:

Generally, persons who choose CAM approaches are seeking ways to improve their health and well-being or to relieve symptoms associated with chronic, even terminal, illness or the side effects of conventional treatments for them. Other reasons for choosing to use CAM include having a holistic health philosophy or a transformational experience that changes one's worldview and wanting greater control over one's health. (Barnes et al 2008:1)

At first glance, using CAM as a means to improve health or relieve symptoms is nothing special— that is what any medical system is generally for. But why do people in the US spend over \$34 billion per year out-of-pocket on complementary and alternative medicines? Holding a holistic health philosophy or a transformed worldview and wanting control over one's health deserve a closer look, as does Baer's claim that complementary and alternative medicines may offer counterhegemonic elements to biomedicine, specifically to its "elitist, hierarchical, bureaucratic, and iatrogenic aspects" (Baer 2004:x). In sum, the fact that CAM is popular in the US, where biomedicine and conventional psychotherapy carry an hegemonic authoritative knowledge, suggests that they fall short in some way for some individuals.

Disease Etiology: Neo-Shamanism vs. Biomedicine

Neo-shamanism, situated as a counter-reaction to a disenchanted modernity, resides in a lineage of healing that reaches as far back in human experience as possible.

Traditionally, shamanism functioned fundamentally as a practical spiritual healing system to ensure the health of the group. Shamans prevented and healed illness, using their skills and relationships with beings in the shamanic realm to restore vitality and health to people by retrieving and returning lost soul pieces and remove spiritual intrusions lodged in people's energetic bodies. They also performed divination, located game for the hunt thus ensuring the nutritional health of the group, and acted as psycho-pomp, assisting the spirits of the dead to move on to their final resting place (see Katz 1981 and Jakobsen 1998 for examples).

The explanatory model of disease and health of the shamanistic healing system assumes extra-material causes for disease and misfortune. This generally takes the form of a *personalistic* disease etiology, whereby “disease is explained as due to the *active, purposeful intervention* of an *agent*, who may be human (a witch or sorcerer), nonhuman (a ghost, an ancestor, an evil spirit) or supernatural (a deity or other very powerful being)” but can also include a *naturalistic* disease etiology, which explains illness in impersonal, systemic terms, especially if the “balance appropriate to the age and condition of the individual, in his natural and social environment” is upset (Foster 1976: 775, emphasis his; also see Kleinman 1995). In either case, the cause of ill health lies in an unseen, extra-material realm populated by spirits both animal and human-like, and the shaman has the tools and techniques necessary to travel to that realm and work with, implore, master, and otherwise engage with those spirits to effect healing. The modern shamanic practitioner does the same: learning to alter his state of consciousness, commonly with auditory driving employing a drum or rattle, in order to diagnose illness and make the unseen manifest. He then will remedy the problem at what, in Western

parlance, might be called the energetic or spiritual level, that is, the unseen and extra-material.

The explanatory model of disease in modern shamanism is purportedly based on traditional shamanism. As taught in the workshops and classes I attended, it revolves around three basic causes of illness found across traditional shamanic cultures: loss or imbalance of power, intrusion, and soul loss. A loss of power tends to manifest as fatigue, loss of motivation, bad luck, chronic illness, and lack of vitality. Power, in the sense of energy or vitality, can be restored to an individual by the retrieval of a “Power Animal,” that is, the neo-shaman will seek a spirit animal in nonordinary reality who volunteers to watch over and protect the client. The client is then instructed to develop a relationship with that animal and call on its strengths. Power can also be restored through the “illumination” process (as taught in the Four Winds school). This process removes energetic “gunk” and “sludge” from an individual’s chakras, or energy vortexes. The “illumination” of the chakras, allows energy and power to flow freely. An intrusion is a piece of foreign energy lodged in the patient’s “luminous body” (energy field, or spiritual self), and tends to manifest in acute physical symptoms, which can become chronic. Intrusions can be the result of sorcery (purposeful mal-intent) or a side effect of negative thought forms, which, modern shamanism teaches, are real and external to self. The practitioner locates these intrusions and extracts them, disposing of them in a way that will neutralize their negative energy, like sending them to a body of water, placing them in fire, or burying them in the ground. Soul loss results from an individual either giving a “piece of themselves” to someone, as in an unequal or unhealthy relationship, having a piece of their soul stolen from them, or losing a piece during trauma. Symptoms

associated with soul loss are depression, fatigue, a feeling that part of self is missing, addiction, chronic disease, and immune deficiency problems. The neo-shamanic practitioner, with the help of spirits with whom he or she has developed a working relationship, finds the lost soul part(s) and brings it back to the patient, blowing it back into the body through the heart and the crown of the head.

The disease etiology of the modern shamanic healing system is enchanted. It holds the premise that the cause and treatment of disease lie outside ordinary, material reality and are thus not available for examination in the physical, empirical sense. This is in direct conflict with the underlying premise of biomedicine. Biomedicine is materialist, based precisely upon an empirical biological reality—a physical, organic disease etiology privileging that which can be observed and measured in ordinary, everyday reality through physical means (Good 1994; Kleinman 1995).

Disease entities are resident in the physical body; whether grossly apparent, as the wildly reproducing cells of cancer, or subtly evident through their effects, as in the disordered thoughts and feelings of schizophrenia or major depression, diseases are biological... (Good 1994: 8)

Disease, both emotional/psychological and physical, in the biomedical frame, is located within the interior space of the body and should be both observable and measurable (Nettleton et al. 2004). Even more, biomedicine downplays to the point of dismissal the psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of health and disease.

Kleinman (1995) characterizes biomedicine's materialist assumption thusly:

The psychological, social, and moral are only so many superficial layers of epiphenomenal cover that disguise the bedrock of truth, the ultimately natural substance in pathology and therapy, the real stuff: biology as an architectural structure and its chemical associates. The other orders of reality are by definition questionable. (30)

The pathogens of neo-shamanism, while manifest in physical symptoms, are neither interior nor available to physical examination. The biomedical emphasis, and indeed insistence, upon a disenchanting, physical empiricism is both ineffective against the unseen pathogenic forms of modern shamanism, and results in a modern medical, material “flatland” (Wilber 1998). Kleinman (1995) ultimately argues that this is a key limitation of the biomedical model, stating: “This radically reductionistic value orientation is ultimately dehumanizing,” suggesting that the “very idea of a moral purpose to the illness experience is a biomedical impossibility” (31, 32). This has resulted in a fragmented health care experience, where patients check their “whole selves” at the door, leaving their emotional, social, and especially spiritual, selves behind.

Why Neo-Shamanism as an Alternative to Biomedicine?

The Limits of Biomedicine

Modern shamanic practitioners employ the tools and techniques of traditional shamans to effect healing in a modern context while rejecting the materialism of the biomedical model. Harner (1980), a key promoter of neo-shamanism, suggests that modern shamanic practitioners strive to answer the inadequacies of biomedicine and conventional psychotherapy:

Today we are discovering that even the near-miracles of modern Western medicine are not always adequate in themselves to solve completely all the problems of those who are ill or who wish to avoid illness. Increasingly, health professionals and their patients are seeking supplementary healing methods, and many healthy individuals are also engaged in personal experimentation to discover workable alternative approaches to achieving well-being... the ancient methods of shamanism are already time-tested; in fact, they have been tested immeasurably longer, for example, than psychoanalysis and a variety of other psychotherapeutic techniques. (xviii)

Recall Weber's idea that modernity's secularization of society and reliance on the material and physical as an epistemological premise disenchanting the world. Harner (1980) frames the quest for a more "whole" healing and spirituality as a *re-enchantment*. He argues that the quest for re-enchantment rests on three things: 1) a distrust of "ecclesiastical dogma and authority to provide... adequate evidence of the realms of the spirit or, indeed, with evidence that there is a spirit" and a demand for an empirical experience of such; 2) a desire for a medicine which will utilize the mind in the healing of the body; and 3) an emphasis on spiritual ecology—

reverence for, and spiritual communication with, the other beings of the Earth and with the Planet itself... not simple Nature worship, but a two-way spiritual communication that resurrects the lost connections our human ancestors had with the awesome spiritual power and beauty of our garden Earth. (Harner 1980: xi-xiii)

Fuller (2005) agrees, stating that individuals who are drawn to or utilize alternative medicines do so because they are "seeking a more spiritually significant way of viewing the world than either modern science or mainstream religion has afforded them," but not in ignorance of science (375-6).

Participants in my study report engaging with neo-shamanism as a healing modality for one overarching reason: biomedicine is too limited, both in its underlying premise and its scope. In general, they are dissatisfied with conventional medical and psychological therapies, finding them to be ineffectual and not holistic. They tend to hold a worldview that is in conflict with the reductionist premise of biomedicine, and some are spiritual seekers, using neo-shamanism as a path of self-actualization. In the main, like Harner and Fuller, they hold the nonphysical aspect of healing to be vital to their well-being, and find health and healing to be inherent in their spiritual practice. In

fact, Tom, a middle aged participant, stated that just learning the technique of the shaman's journey was a healing experience:

When I first learned to journey, I was surprised [by] the unconditional acceptance that I got from helping spirits. ...totally accepting of who I am. ...very few of us really accept ourselves at any deep level. So anyway, so that was probably the most healing thing... (Tom, neo-shamanic participant)

Those that reported being dissatisfied with conventional medical treatment and psychotherapy stated it was either difficult to access, ineffective, caused more problems than it solved, or some combination thereof. This motivation for engagement in neo-shamanism is counter to biomedicine's hierarchy, bureaucracy, and iatrogenic nature (Baer 2004) and points to biomedicine's lack of efficacy in diagnosis and/or therapy for some conditions and/or some individuals. In some cases individuals are looking for treatment for a condition that biomedicine and conventional psychotherapy have failed to address effectively, for example, lack of vitality, lacking life purpose, feeling stuck, generational patterns of abuse, and chronic problems such as stomach or back pain, Multiple Sclerosis, and low energy. Clients also bring issues to modern shamanic practitioners that they perceive to be out of the scope of biomedicine, such as spirit possession, coping with near death experiences, removing the energetic imprint of an illness or emotional problem, and seeking direction concerning a life crisis or health condition. Some describe neo-shamanic treatment as "therapy on steroids," stating that because it erases the energetic affinity for their condition, be it physical, behavioral, or emotional, they are healed and freed from that condition.

Many study participants reported using neo-shamanism side-by-side with conventional modalities, for example, in the case of flu, migraine, addiction, cancer, surgery, and depression. Jannine, a practitioner, states that she uses modern shamanic

techniques to “promote swift and profound healing” in her clients, as a complement to conventional medical treatment and counseling or therapy. Anthony, a participant, explained it this way: “Modern medicine is really good for some things. But what we hold in the energy field requires different therapy.”

Ultimately, though, many simply want a therapeutic that regards them as a whole human, acknowledging body, mind, emotion, and spirit. Biomedicine’s focus on the physical, organic cause of disease fails to acknowledge the individual holistically. The omission of the emotional, psychological, spiritual, and social in the very premise of biomedicine is unacceptable for some and even considered a cause of disease itself. Study participants described modern society as fragmented, and see it as undermining health, which is equated with an integrated self—Geertz’s (1984) “bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole” (126). This suggests why many participants described themselves as seekers, looking for meaning and purpose: they refer to the deficiency of modern society —“I always thought that there was a huge part missing in my culture” (Kelly, neo-shamanic practitioner)—echoing Weber’s characterization of modern society as being ontologically deficient.

This culture is as we experience it is difficult, and for many reasons is kind of a meat grinder. And if people get ground enough they either kill themselves and give up, or, as the Buddhists say, they become ‘hungry ghosts’—searching for something but nothing ever satisfies them. There’s a lot of walking wounded out there. (Norman, neo-shamanic participant)

Modern shamanism is a way for participants to “step into power,” walk their “own path,” and find their “authentic self”—a self which can’t ignore or deny things about their physical and emotional health, their relationships, and their behaviors:

I'll tell you what we've been through: you examine all your stuff. In the Medicine Wheel you examine it and bring it up and you get rid of it. And it makes a huge difference because you can't hide from it any more. Maybe you can for a couple of days or something but when you get back into it, it's like, 'nope that's not going to cut it.' (Anthony, neo-shamanic participant)

Interestingly, when study participants came to neo-shamanism with a specific emotional problem (82% of interview sample), such as depression, anxiety, addiction, abuse, and life crises, they unfailingly report healing not in the language of their ailment, but in terms such as increased power and awareness, self-transformation, and integration or feeling “whole.”¹⁸ As individuals engage with and take on the enchanted cosmology of modern shamanism, they begin to define healing and wellness differently than the biomedical model does. It is no longer health as freedom from physical pathology and symptoms, but becomes health as defined through a broader emotional, mental, social, and spiritual frame. Indeed, healing as a regaining of the holistic self or as a means of coping with sickness (as opposed to cure) appears to be at odds with the primary goals of biomedicine—which is to remove pathology and repair physiological malfunctions (Waldram 2000). In this study, individuals, in place of a resolution of symptoms, equated a feeling of self-integration and connection with “spirit” (in the sense of nature, spirits, and the universe at large) with health and in some cases, this included remaining physically ill, such as in the case of those dealing with cancer, Multiple Sclerosis, and chronic pain.

¹⁸ While self-awareness, transformation, and a feeling of being “whole” were themes in the healing language of the participants in my study, none of them couched the healing aspect of their engagement with neo-shamanism in terms of “finding enlightenment.” Indeed, the teachings presented in classes and workshops I attended steered clear of the idea of “enlightenment” going so far as to state (for example, in one FSS sponsored workshop) that although some shamans may experience enlightenment, (neo)shamanism is not an enlightenment path: “shamans are not mystics, personal enlightenment is not the goal.” Alternatively, “the alleviation of suffering and ignorance, the unity of life, and harmony between all beings” were presented as the purpose of (neo)shamanism.

McGuire (1991) found similar results in her study of contemporary Christian healing in the US. She states “to be healed is not necessarily the same as to be cured. It is common to have received a healing and still have symptoms or recurrences of illness” (42-43). Health, in her study population, was described as both wholeness (being whole in spirit, soul, mind, and body) and holiness (an unattainable ideal of perfection).

A key difference for participants in neo- shamanic healing, is that modern shamanism begins with the assumption that individuals are already whole, and already perfect, and that healing is a restoration of that already existing state. The authentic, perfect self already exists, and we just need to embrace it. Dan, a practitioner, stated:

I talk about it this way: I’m not going to fix you, I don’t have that kind of power, but I believe everybody is capable of fixing their lives because they’re not broken. They may feel like they’re broken but they’re not. You don’t need to be fixed but just because you feel broken doesn’t mean you are. (Dan, neo-shamanic practitioner)

Jannine, also a practitioner, describes it this way:

What comes up during a healing session is more of who that person is naturally and authentically. To give a description: first I find out what the person wants to work on and how far they want to go in that direction. A lot of time people are ready to go there—the whole way. And then, in the energy session I do the rattling, and once I feel that ‘whoooooosh’ I know it’s been released, that big layer they’re ready to let go of, all of that. What I experience intuitively, is that often-times it’s from the center of their energy body. I will see with the Other Vision—I’ll see this pyramid-ish, TeePee-ish form that’s made of gold pole-like structures, vibrating energy lines, and everything starts to connect. It’s energized and it all connects, crackling and snapping like an electric charge. What is that? I don’t know. That’s what I experience it as. And what I feel is happening is it’s allowing their most innate, authentic, original, powerful state to be re-instated. (Jannine, neo-shamanic practitioner)

In sum, biomedicine is circumscribed by its fundamental insistence on the material. This modern line between spirituality and medicine is discarded in the case of modern shamanism. Many study participants stated that they engage in neo-shamanism as a healing modality because their worldview demands a spiritual disease etiology,

which is lacking in biomedicine. Biomedicine is, again, too limited. These individuals, then, tend to engage in neo-shamanism as both a spiritual practice and a healing system.

...one young man came for healing because he wanted to explore a lot of anger he felt inside and all the outcomes I could find related to it. Another woman came to me because she had knee surgery and it took a lot longer to heal than she thought. So whether it's emotional or physical, people are seeking their healing. And my role is in understanding that we all have spiritual roots to our problems, and finding what their spirit is wanting them to understand through their anger, through their knee problems, whatever it is. I'm allowing the voice of their spirit to play an active role in their life. (Jannine, neo-shamanic practitioner)

As seen here, it is difficult, and perhaps unnecessary, to separate alternative spirituality from alternative healing.

Touching the Divine

Fuller (2005) states that a key function of healing rituals cross-culturally is to induce existential encounters with sacred reality whereby the spiritual becomes an experiential reality and the cosmos becomes (re)enchanted. He refers to the traditional shaman as healer and mystagogue and points to Jesus' healing acts as manifestation of his divine nature. The power of these sorts of healings was that they displayed the divine in such a dramatic fashion that they brought deeper consciousness of the spiritual to both the patient and those who witnessed it Elsewhere, Fuller (2001) suggests that the "gradual divorce of physical healing from the church's routine activities [resulted in] few healing practices in Western culture that explicitly foster experiential encounters with a higher spiritual reality" (276).

Neo-shamanism, with its emphasis on direct experiential encounters with the extra-material realm, is one mechanism for touching the divine. For those individuals who are introduced to neo-shamanism as medicine, re-enchancement and spiritual

experience may be an unexpected outcome. For example, Clara, who was referred to a modern shamanic practitioner in her search for relief from some chronic physical conditions, described her experience during the healing ritual like this:

How do I explain this? It's like, and for some reason it has a lot to do with when she works around my head, I see a lot of colors. But there's been two times that I have been out, like floating above my body, with all of these vibrant colors. And I remember the last time it happened, I remembered saying 'oh do you see that?' And it's just the most wonderful feeling in the world and I said to her 'if this is what death is like, how grand.' Have you ever had that? Have you ever gone to that state of being? (Clara, neo-shamanic participant)

Another spoke of reclaiming power in a modern shamanic healing session as a way to regain vitality—something for which his biomedical treatment for low energy was proving ineffective. His participation in a healing ritual resulted in an opening up of the experiential component of his cosmology and was an important step on his path to re-enchantment.

Some participants in my study, however, describe it in reverse. They state that the existential spiritual reality they encounter while practicing modern shamanism induces healing; healing becomes a side-effect in the Western idiom. Melanie, a young practitioner, stated “through my whole life I've been very, very, interested in... the personal transformation of contact with the divine,” and reported that her depression was healed in the course of her spiritual work. She placed credit on the transformational power of the divine to bring forth healing.

Neo-Shamanism as Enchanted Healing?

Eighty-two percent of individuals interviewed in the course of this study reported bringing at least one emotional issue to modern shamanism for healing and 93% of those

reported of healing of that issue. Forty-nine percent reported seeking healing for physical (usually chronic) issues, and 69% of those reported receiving healing of such. In sum, in the majority individuals reported healing as a result of neo-shamanic engagement. As pointed out above, those who came to neo-shamanism with emotional complaints characterized those issues rather precisely but described the healing they experienced as a result of their neo-shamanic engagement in less specific, rather nebulous terms, such as self-integration and transformation, power, awareness, and connection. Those that presented acute physical maladies described the results in terms of resolution of symptoms, while those that presented chronic conditions described results in terms of relief from some portion of their condition. Notably, in this study, emotional/psychological issues and instances of healing were found to have a small (but not statistically significant) positive effect on the level of enchantment of individuals who engage in modern shamanism, while issues and healing of a physical nature did not.

This raises an interesting issue for consideration concerning neo-shamanism as a healing modality for those who engage in it. Modern shamanism requires an enchanted disease etiology. One would expect, then, that individuals who experienced healing through the application of modern shamanic therapeutics would tend to be more open to an enchanted cosmology—that is, be more (re)enchanted, than those who do not. While this does seem to be the direction of the effect, the findings are inconclusive. This is not to say that the healing aspect of neo-shamanism is void of any transformative power in the enchantment of people's lives, but that perhaps it plays only a partial, synergistic, or, undetermined role. It is reasonable to say that those that experienced healing for emotional/psychological issues found that the enchanted worldview of modern

shamanism tended to transform their definition of health, disease, and healing — replacing biomedical categories of “cure” with modern shamanic ideas of “healing” as wholeness.

Community: Leaving Out the Social

There's a real need for human beings to be in a community, a sense of community where we validate ourselves through each other. And it's healthy, it's very healthy to be in a community. ... Every one of us is born with this sense, this longing.

(Darren, middle-aged male neo-shamanic participant)

I think it's a form of soul loss when you're searching for a piece of your lineage in someone else's culture.

(Kelly, young female neo-shamanic practitioner)

Limited Holism

Neo-shamanism, like many complementary and alternative medical systems, offers an holistic approach to healing—answering a fundamental limitation of biomedicine. Participants in neo-shamanic healing seek to join body, mind, and spirit and embrace a spiritual disease etiology. They increasingly seek not only physical and emotional well-being but a connection to something meaningful, a sense of purpose. Recall that the Holistic Health movement of the 1970s (as well as the transpersonal psychology movement of the 1980s) emphasized the whole person –physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and social. They were both a result of dissatisfaction with the limitations of the biomedicine and conventional psychotherapy and counter-reactions to it. However, as alternative medicines have emerged out of the Holistic Health movement, they have done so with the notable omission of the social. Baer (2003) calls

this a *limited holism*, one in which the focus on individual responsibility for health disregards society and its institutions as factors in illness, providing an “alternative form of medical hegemony by reinforcing individualizing patterns in U.S. society” (Baer 2003; 240). Baer (2003) offers a critical examination of two “New Age gurus” as evidence that contemporary alternative health modalities are not really counter-hegemonic. He cites an extreme focus on the individual as means to neglect the social and environmental factors that contribute to ill health. Individuals are not encouraged to join environmental groups, lobby for legislative change, or work in concert with others to fight against the “oppressive aspects of the social, political, and economic order that are ultimately responsible for the problems of so many people” (Danforth 1989: 284-185 cited in Baer 2003: 243). Thus, the issues of class, race, age, gender, and the like are omitted from alternative health modalities and the pathogenic status quo remains.

However, while the pathogenic social and environmental elements may be neglected in alternative health modalities, they are not ignored. It is common, both in mainstream and alternative medicine, to acknowledge that these can adversely affect health, but the focus remains on individual management of the effects, not on challenging the institutions responsible for them. Lau (2000) places this in the frame of Beck’s “risk society.” Beck (1993) suggests that modernity has produced “side effects” which are hazards to human health and safety resulting in a society that places its members in constant risk to their well-being. Coupled with the loss of certainty resulting from the secularization of modern society (Finkler 2005), risk society creates a novel class of people called the “worried well”—educated, middle class individuals concerned with planetary and cosmic wellness with discretionary income to engage in alternative forms

of spirituality and medicine (see Baer 2004; Bellah 1996). Safety becomes the primary concern of risk society and it “thrives on a discourse of individual responsibility” (Lau 2000:37).

Risk society discourse individualizes social illnesses in a way that isolates the individual from the body politic, and ‘social crises appear as individual crises, which are no longer (or are only very indirectly) perceived in terms of their rootedness in the social realm.’ (Lau 2000:134)

As such, the moral aspect of health and illness resides in individual health-related choices, not in, for example the forces responsible for the inequitable distribution of disease discussed so passionately by Farmer (2005). This holds for biomedicine and its alternatives, including at least in some part, the modern application of shamanism.

Modern shamanism offers a limited but enchanted holism, a novel approach to the self-responsibility for health model:

...no one in risk society can be wholly safe from its dangers and poisons. Consequently, social responses to risk society—and to modernity—circle back to an imagined past existing prior to industrialization, a past epitomized by references to more integrated relationships with nature and the interconnectedness of all living things... (Lau 2000:9)

Drawing from its lineage of traditional shamanism, modern shamanism creates a health modality that is ostensibly connected to nature and spirit but at the same time individually oriented. It does so without challenging the institutions of contemporary society –that is, the structural issues in the etiology of ill health and those of inequity dispossessing the poor, and more importantly perhaps, the oppression of the very native groups New Age participants look to for spiritual guidance to a natural harmony (Baer 2003; Kehoe 2000; Lau 2000; Povinelli 2001).

Recall that Nadel (1946) presents the traditional shaman as a source of novel information that may challenge the status quo, in contrast to the priest who defends it.

The transformation of traditional shamanic cosmology and tools into the modern venue has curtailed this novel use of shamanically gained information. While the individual's status quo is not only challenged but often shaken to its core as individuals undergo a re-enchanting of their daily lives through neo-shamanic experiences, an expansion of that to social involvement is omitted by the modern nature of neo-shamanism. Neo-shamanism, in contrast with traditional shamanism, is individualistic—it is a modern phenomenon for modern individuals. While agreeing that the very planet itself is in danger of impending catastrophe, no less the larger social problems of the day, the modern shamanic solution remains focused on the individual: to create a healthy planet one must focus on self-transformation and increased personal well-being. This position is reflected in the Four Winds Society's promise that completing the Light Body School will not only help individuals "discover [their] own gifts and abilities" but will "bring balance to the body, to the soul, and to the earth" (<http://www.thefourwinds.com/tp-hlb.php> accessed 11/27/09).

In the main, while participants in my study may contextualize their ill-health and ailments as a product of "broken" political, economic, health, and environmental systems, they do not report getting personally involved in upsetting the status quo to change them. One couple I interviewed characterizes shamanism as "service to others" but qualifies that with suggesting that there is no way we can know what the "highest good" is, which comes across as a caution against getting too passionate about working toward any specific collective outcome. Another participant, Nelda, comes right out and states that until "the legislature and our economy creates a system" that doesn't allow for externalities, that is, for systematized pollution inherent in institutional structure, she will

not bother to recycle. She dismisses the fact that “it requires more than personal growth and self-transformation to change long-standing public policies and powerful social institutions” (Danforth 1989: 284-185 cited in Baer 2003: 243). Another, Megan, agrees, stating that Spirit directs her away from pragmatic engagement in solving social and planetary problems and consistently points her back to her own heart:

It’s my consistent message. Every time I’m going to run out there and join activity that’s going to make everything better I get pulled back and say ‘No. Heal your heart. Find the love and that will fix everything.’ (Megan, neo-shamanic participant)

In this perspective, neo-shamanism is consistent with Baer’s criticism concerning the limited holism of alternative medicines. Modern shamanic adherents are aware of the social and planetary ills that surround them and even explain them on the social level as cultural soul loss –i.e., the void of ontologically deficient modern society:

...in our culture, there’s no place, almost forcing [us] into some sort of cultural soul loss... And just evidence of how our culture is impacting the world at large is a big source of evidence how we in ourselves are not healthy and are not, we’re just not able to function in a way that serves our higher purpose. (Kelly, neo-shamanic practitioner)

But they do not, as a whole, suggest a remedy on the level of the social, instead they subscribe to the idea that personal transformation will bring about social and planetary healing.

It’s firing the grid— individuals activating other individuals to activate other individuals and raising the consciousness of the planet. To evolve the human being, to evolve the human species to be less aggressive, less unconscious. (Nelda, neo-shamanic participant)

The focus on healing self as a way to solve problems of a larger context makes some sense, for how can disenchanted, ontologically deficient individuals be a force for positive change in the world today? Potentially, they can not. So it would follow that re-enchantment and self-transformation are needed to empower people to heal society and

the planet. However, the modern turn to the self, even within neo-shamanism, backfires as the cult of the individual engenders feelings of powerlessness against the entrenched power of social institutions that structure the world we live in. Oldenburg (1999) states that “the course of urban development in America is pushing the individual toward that line separating proud independence from pitiable isolation” (xxix). As a result, people in US society have become less engaged in social and civic activities and organizations over the last four decades, and so too have the benefits of that engagement —mutual support, cooperation, trust, and institutional effectiveness—declined (Putnam 2000). This sense of powerlessness flows from modernity’s detraditionalized self which does not belong to an overarching system but is informed by it. The premodern self embedded in the social is left behind, and the modern self exercises independence, authority, and choice, finding identity within (Heelas 1996). No longer is a person part of a larger organic social being, but an individual fighting his or her way around impersonal, untouchable social institutions.

The Detraditionalized Self, Community, and Healing

Approximately half of the participants in this study express a desire for community. They report feeling disconnected from the social, feeling alone, and like they do not belong. For some this is the result of having no one to share the enchanted aspects of their lives with.

It’s not like I went shopping and tell you about a great dress you might like too. I haven’t really been able to discuss this with anybody. It’s not like I’m going to tell anyone this is what I did and I’m going to do it again. (Clara, neo-shamanic participant)

For others, it is a desire to be healed of “a pervasive feeling of anomie and cultural disintegration” (Berman 1981:17) which they attribute to soul loss at the social level and describe variously as a hole we are trying to fill, a loss of cultural lineage, and the feeling something is missing in their own culture. One study participant, Darren, expressed his dismay with modern society this way: “I mean, our society is such a mess! It’s almost embarrassing! I’m unhappy, I feel empty, I’m unfulfilled, I’m lonely.” Another, Jon, points to our evolved need for the social: “There’s so much alienation in our society, it’s like we have the ethic of the individual and it’s great in a lot of ways but man did not evolve as a lone creature, we evolved in relationships.”

Modern shamanism does not seem to re-traditionalize the self, embedding individuals into community in the premodern sense. It does, however, at some level, answer the anomie and alienation of modern society. After all, most of those in this study who came to modern shamanism in search of community, and some for whom community was not an issue, reported finding it. What it seems to offer is community in a form that fits with the character of the modern individual: a looser, “fuzzy” sense of community (Lindquist 1997). Indeed, some report feeling a sense of community just knowing that there are others around the world engaged in the same sort of age-old spiritual healing practice.

I also realized that my whole life I’ve been doing ceremony. When there was something bad that happened I always did ceremony to let go –and without realizing that there was a protocol and this was the thing that people were doing. So it’s so fun and exciting for me to realize there’s a community around this and around the world everyone is doing the same thing. (Kelly, neo-shamanic practitioner)

Others describe how participating in modern shamanic healing groups gives them a sense of belonging.

I walked away with a sense of community. And the connection in that intensive experiential work, it was like nothing I'd ever experienced. It spawned bonds with people on an emotional and spiritual level. And that sense of community was definitely something I was missing in my daily life. (Alexis, neo-shamanic participant)

However, this sense of community is not the traditional community of tribal life, or even the reciprocity of small town America characterized by Bellah et al. (1996), Putnam (2000), and Oldenburg (1999). It is best described by what Lindquist (1997) calls “fuzzy community,” a term that underlines the “fluid, blurred, constantly renegotiated character of [the community’s] boundaries” (124). Lindquist states that participants in the Northern European neo-shamanic workshops she attended are in the most part strangers to each other, yet they share an intense weekend of experiences. She suggests that experience is the ontological authority in neo-shamanism, and culture is created out of raw experience through “rapid socialization.” Instruction about shamanism, shared experiences, and the resulting discussions and telling of individual experiences create a sense of *communitas* —Turner’s (1974:169) feeling of social equality, solidarity, and togetherness— during the weekend workshops. Annette, a middle aged participant in modern shamanism describes it like this:

I think it’s incredible how close I get with the group. Like at a weekend workshop: it was amazing after two days and people sharing, you felt a closeness with them. It was amazing! And by the end of [a six week course] you always felt to close to them, but you’re not doing anything with them, outside the circle. You know, I met [a co-participant] once a month for lunch, and I’ve met [another co-participant] a couple of times, but I don’t get really close. We’re different groups of people, very different people. There’s a spiritual connection there, but I mean, certain people, I don’t mean anything mean, but there are people who I would never even look at some of them outside. I wouldn’t ever notice them. But I begin to like them. (Annette, neo-shamanic participant)

This description underscores the autonomous, experiential, modern character of engagement in neo-shamanism. It also suggests that modern shamanic groups could be a

means of forging links across social classes and boundaries, links which are less and less likely to happen in modern American society (Duany et al. 2000), creating a place where people of various backgrounds who would normally not run in the same social circles can come together united by a common spiritual and healing practice, a common cosmology.

Two or three of the participants in my study describe themselves as “not joiners,” engaging with neo-shamanic groups only as needed, i.e., when they feel there is a certain lesson for them to learn or they feel drawn to a specific workshop. A handful of others engage with a virtual neo-shamanic community, joining blogs, chat-rooms, and other internet-facilitated means to stay in touch. Norman describes his engagement with a virtual community and the spectacular healing of one of the members:

Basically what happened is that we had a woman on that shamanism website who was kind of part of that inner group, and some of us who had had some experience had kind of a mini group that worked with problems just through emails and stuff. One of us came on and asked for healing. Her doctor had sent her to an oncologist and she'd been diagnosed with advanced cancer somewhere down in the woman's plumbing, in the ovaries maybe, and it was quite serious and she wanted help. She'd gone to a couple doctors and they'd confirmed it. So I wasn't quite sure how to help but I said: 'Ok I'll help you.' So we agreed on a time and place—she's multiple states away from here—and I journeyed and went to my Power Animal in a middle world journey and we came to her middle world self. She was lying there, and we did what I would call psychic-surgery. We basically cut her open and the first thing I saw was the most beautiful insect I've ever seen in my life. A red ant. This ant was large and it was red and it was gorgeous. I removed it and then looked closer and there were thousands of little ordinary-sized red ants. So we removed all those and irrigated the insides of her with water and then with light and put her back together. And the next week she went to see her doctor and had more tests and she was cancer free. And it caused a little stir in our group. (Norman, neo-shamanic participant¹⁹)

This report of long distance healing points to the “fit” of the virtual with modern shamanism. Neo-shamanic schools teach that shamanic travel in extra-matieral reality is

¹⁹ Although Norman reported doing healing work for others, he did not self-identify as a practitioner of neo-shamanism. Without fail, only those study participants who offered their services as a practitioner of modern shamanism to the community self-identified as practitioners, the remainder, while they sometimes did work for others, did not offer their services to the community in any formal sense.

out of space and time. The Internet facilitates linkages out of space and time among people with common cosmologies and experiences. For example, Melanie describes herself as embedded in a community despite the fact that she is thousands of miles from its members: “We’re so spread out and there’s no authority, so we use the Internet.”

Modern shamanic practice also serves to embed the modern individual into an extended network of helping spirits, guides, and power animals. This sense of deep connection with a world outside of ordinary reality populated with benevolent beings brings healing to individuals feeling the fragmentation of modern society. Most described the sense of union with all beings and the connection with an animated universe as antidote to the alienation of modern society.

What I’m saying is that working with the spirits you can access material and do things that you cannot as an individual do. But that in some way, some deep essence of who and what we are, we and the spirits are not different. (Jannine, neo-shamanic practitioner)

All of it. It was becoming one with the universe and the universe becoming one with me so there was no separation any more. It is very experiential, you can’t really describe it. It’s ok, you’re the butterfly, you’re the rock, you’re part of everything, there’s no division anymore. (Helen, neo-shamanic participant)

One thing participants told me again and again, is that when they work in a group, whether face-to-face or virtually, their experience is enhanced.

I find meeting regularly makes a difference but my journeys are different too in the group than at home. The circle gives consistency and higher quality journeying. (Annette, neo-shamanic participant)

You enhance each other. The community! The journeys I did in the group were always more powerful and more intense than the ones I do on my own. (Nelda, neo-shamanic participant)

In sum, engagement in neo-shamanism seems to answer at some level the desire for community and the perception that modern society is lacking some essential social

element. Some study participants spoke of an ethereal oneness as an important aspect of their engagement in neo-shamanism, and engagement in modern shamanism does seem to re-embed the individual in the social in some sense, but it does not re-traditionalize the modern self. It remains that neo-shamanism is a modern phenomenon, and the desire for community and connection is mitigated by the increasingly individualistic and isolated nature of contemporary life in the US (Oldenburg 1999). This perceived need for community may be met to some degree, instead, by the “fuzzy community” of weekend workshops, the virtual communities facilitated by the Internet, and by the engagement with the spirit guides and helpers of the shamanic realm.

Heal the Self to Heal the Planet: Discarding Pragmatic Solutions to the World’s Problems?

Engagement with “community” as a opting in to the social aspect of holism does not generally address specific issues of planetary, environmental, or societal health, or produce pragmatic solutions to them. As an example, the Four Winds Society website advertises spiritual expeditions to South American, but it does not address the poverty and oppression of indigenous peoples of South America. Instead it highlights the friendly nature of and “magical” experience of those very people, and advertises the beauty of the environment and the superior accommodations –“our exquisite jungle lodge serves superb meals”– for its, we can assume based on the cost, wealthy clientele²⁰

(<http://www.thefourwinds.com/exp-peru.php> accessed 11/27/09).

²⁰ Expeditions range in price from \$1500-\$3350 “land cost” which does not include airfare, airport departure taxes, lunch and dinner, transfers for early arrivals or late departures, optional gratuities, additional hotel nights made necessary by airline schedules, traveler’s insurance, cost of medical immunizations, items of personal nature (<http://www.thefourwinds.com/exp-peru.php> accessed 11/27/09).

In contrast, the Foundation for Shamanic Studies holds as part of its explicit work the preservation of extant shamanic practitioners and cultures:

Our Living Treasures designation provides an annual lifetime stipend to exceptionally distinguished indigenous shamans in less-developed countries where their age-old knowledge of shamanism and shamanic healing is in danger of extinction. Special care is given to providing the economic assistance necessary to allow these Living Treasures to pass on their knowledge to their people.

(<http://www.shamanism.org/fssinfo/fsswork.html> accessed 11/27/09)

It does not, however, challenge the institutions that created this need.

Those neo-shamanic groups that do address the planetary tend to do so through ritual and ceremony. For example, the Foundation for Shamanic Studies offers an advanced workshop on Shamanism and the Spirits of Nature:

From ancient times, shamans have worked with the spirits of nature for healing, survival, and knowledge. By learning from the plants and animals, from the rocks and mountains, from the winds and waters, and from the sun, moon, and stars, shamans helped their peoples live in harmony with the universe. In a world now out of balance, the way of the shaman can teach how again to respect nature, our Planet, and its inhabitants at a deep spiritual level. As our ancestors everywhere once knew, our survival depends on the survival of the other species. By working together intensively through shamanic journeys and other spiritual experiences, we will dedicate ourselves to working in both nonordinary and ordinary reality to restore and maintain a living Planet. (http://www.shamanism.org/workshops/calendar.php?Wkshp_ID=25 accessed 11/27/09)

And, Brant Secunda, founder of the Dance of the Deer Foundation states that

One way to connect ourselves is perform ceremonies, to make prayers and think positive thoughts, not only for ourselves and our families and our fellow human beings, but for all of creation—for all the two-leggeds and the four-leggeds and the winged ones and the trees and the flowers and for the mineral kingdom. We have to change in order for the world to change. (Brant Secunda, www.shamanism.com accessed 11/28/09).

In addition, while offering community ritual as means for self and planetary wellness, both the Dance of the Deer Foundation and the Heart of the Healer foundation also offer more explicit engagement with the plight of modern indigenous cultures and

the environment. For example, the mission of the Heart of the Healer foundation, which is explicitly stated on their web page, is “to preserve indigenous cultures and restore our Earth” (www.heartofthehealer.org/about_us/home.php accessed 11/27/09). And this organization does so through the Rainforest Sanctuary Initiative designed to ensure the preservation of Amazonian biodiversity and the protection of indigenous cultures with programs to buy rainforest land and to develop models of sustainable development or the local communities (<http://www.heartofthehealer.org/programs/rsi.php> accessed 11/27/09). Also available is the Shipibo Community Outreach Program designed to provide food and school supplies to children living on the outskirts of Lima, Peru. Concerned individuals can donate to these causes through the Heart of the Healer website, or sign up to volunteer service.

Involvement in working toward structural change, or the alleviation of suffering for the world’s disempowered, of an individual engaged in the practice of modern shamanism is not compulsory, however. Most of the individuals I met in the course of this study were not involved in such issues in a way any more personal than donating money.

While avenues for a full holism are available for those who look for them, in general, modern shamanism offers only a limited holism, neglecting the social.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Neo-shamanism is the modern application of shamanic techniques coupled with an enchanted cosmology in contemporary Western society. The neo-shamanic enchanted worldview is in conflict with modernity's disenchantment. Modern shamanism emerged from a long cultural trajectory of counter-reaction to modernity and institutionalized religion. While it is ostensibly modeled on traditional cultures, it is ultimately a modern engagement with an animated cosmos undertaken by modern individuals.

Neo-shamanism is a healing system alternative to biomedicine and conventional psychotherapy. It is essentially a group of assumptions, experiences, and techniques drawn from traditional shamanism, premised on an enchanted cosmos while retaining the modern self. Its basic premise of an enchanted world presupposes an enchanted physiology, which suggests both a disease etiology and a therapeutic modality not available in biomedicine. The research reported here investigates neo-shamanism as a healing system. It explores the enchanted nature of healing available in neo-shamanism as applied to modern individuals living in a disenchanted modernity. It seeks to fill the hole in the anthropological literature concerning how neo-shamanism is being used, by whom, why, and to what effect.

Shamanism is an extremely old healing modality. Its transformation into a healing system functioning in modern society ought to be of high interest both as a cultural phenomenon in its own right and as a form of complementary and alternative medicine. There is a general agreement that modern society, for all its benefits, has resulted in many chronic health problems and that biomedicine has not answered them sufficiently. In addition, the provision of health care in the US is at best problematic, evident in the 45 million uninsured individuals lacking adequate access to health care (www.kaiseredu.org) and the persistence of the political issue of health care reform. The most recent figures indicate that people in the US spend \$34 billion/year out-of-pocket on alternative medicines (NCCAM 2009: 1). With rising rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancers, depression, autism, asthma, chronic fatigue syndrome and similar conditions that biomedicine cannot yet cure, alternative therapies may offer palliative and curative treatment to many people who are dissatisfied with or not responsive to conventional, biomedical treatments and/or do not have access to them.

With this in mind, this research is an ethnographic investigation of neo-shamanism. It has examined the following questions: Does the enchanted premise of neo-shamanism serve to re-enthrall the world of the modern individual? If so, in the process of re-enthrallment, do those who engage in neo-shamanism seek to re-embed the self in the social, that is to re-traditionalize the self, or do they seek to heal the Cartesian divide between body and mind/spirit for the individual alone? Do participants report healing and what is the nature of this healing?

(Re)Enchantment

In modern society, some individuals have always been enchanted, and that enchanted lived experience places them at odds with the society around them. The tension generated from living an enchanted life with no framework but that offered by a disenchanted modernity to make sense of it often manifests in emotional or physical illness, alienation, or fear that one is insane. Relief can be found through the enchanted premise and worldview of modern shamanism. Individuals who have always been enchanted find that their lived experience fits well into a neo-shamanic worldview. These individuals report finding resolution and healing for the consequences of the tension they previously endured.

The bulk of individuals who took part in this research, however, reported having experiences of enchantment as a result of engaging in modern shamanism. For those not fully enchanted, those experiences create an unresolved conflict with their mainstream, disenchanted view of things. These individuals then struggled to name their experiences and make sense of them, finding themselves unexpectedly in the sometimes difficult and confusing process of re-enchanting their cosmos.

Despite holding or adopting an enchanted worldview, both of these groups (the always enchanted and those in the process of being re-enchanted) remain modern individuals living in a society premised upon modern materialistic assumptions. While traditional shamanism is generally accepted to operate on the community level (recall that, as framed by Durkheim (1992), the “traditional self” was embedded in the social), modern shamanism takes the individual as its basic unit. As a modern phenomenon, neo-

shamanism is consistent with the modern “turn to the self.”²¹ Therefore, when modern shamanic participants report finding a sense of community as a result of their engagement in modern shamanic activities, it is not a sense of self embedded in community and “lost in the depths of the social mass” (Durkheim 1992: 56), but perhaps Lindquist’s (1999) “fuzzy” community, and even then, the underlying focus remains on the self.

In sum, neo-shamanism functions as a spiritual practice and healing modality for *modern* individuals, emerging from desires for both autonomy and direct empirical experience of spirituality and health. Modern shamanic practitioners and participants engage in a dynamic process of balancing their modern, secularized self with enchanted, magical, unexplainable experiences, which call into question the materialistic premise of modernity.

Additionally, the modern turn to the self finds a home in the ideas and techniques of traditional shamanism as they have been incorporated into and grown out of contemporary society. For example, neo-shamanism’s primary issue of urgency is to heal the self—a primacy that fits neatly into the individualistic nature of modernity. Further, it is a common neo-shamanic premise that this process of healing the self will, as a matter of course, result in healing larger contexts—the social, the planetary, and the universal—without a pragmatic requirement that reaches beyond the individual. It has the potential to challenge the status quo, but this would require its adherents step beyond the limits of enchanted self-transformation and act in the broader material, physical world for change. In this sense, while neo-shamanism is a reaction to modernity, it reinforces rather than

²¹ Recall, as discussed in Chapter I, that a key facet of modernity is the Western conception of the self: the person who is a “bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background” (Geertz 1984: 126).

throws open to question the fundamental individual focus of modern society (Singer & Baer 2007: 34).

Enchanted Healing

Most of the participants in this study reported seeking out modern shamanism for healing. They present emotional or physical issues for which the biomedical modality has been limited or dissatisfying in some way, and find success with the application of neo-shamanic healing techniques. The nature of modern shamanic healing is interesting. Although it can result in a very practical resolution of physical symptoms and conditions, it does so on the premise of an enchanted cosmology. Exposure to this cosmology tends to nudge people's understanding of the healing experience from the Western focus on finding a cure toward a broader frame of wholeness and integration, i.e., healing. Priorities shift from attaining a measurable physical change, as required by the disenchanted, material premise of biomedicine, to becoming aware, empowered, and integrated—in one word: transformed. However, here the tension between a healing system premised on a traditional, premodern sense of the universe and the people using it who are embodying the modern self becomes manifest anew. People struggle to explain their lived experiences premised on an enchanted world exterior to the self. And they put these experiences into the language of a healing terminology that *fits* with modern society, one that presents nonordinary (shamanic) experience as internal, not extra-material, as premised by the ideas of shamanism. For this reason, shamanic healing is often couched in terms of “interior experience” and not validated as a legitimate, external, healing modality.

Enchanted Modernity

... people develop their own individual and collective understandings and responses to illness and to other threats to their well-being, but they do so in a world that is not of their own making.
(Singer & Baer 2007: 34)

Modernity serves as the structure within which the individuals who participated in this research live their lives. This dissertation takes a critical approach to the structure of modernity, following Weber: that is, the modern emphasis on the external, material, and measurable *disenchants* the world and the result is a Western worldview that is ontologically deficient.²² This worldview creates a tension for those individuals whose lives are suffused with meaning and enchanted experience. Neo-shamanism draws its worldview from a premodern structure, that is, a structure that emphasizes the animated, enchanted, and collective (social), a structure in which meaning is assumed to be available. However, although premised on what are considered to be premodern ideas about the nature of being, neo-shamanism is at its essence oriented on the self, thus it is a truly *modern* engagement with an ostensibly “traditional” *enchanted* cosmos.

Latour (1993) suggests, however, that we have never truly been modern. His premise is that the “enlightened” Cartesian differentiation of matter and spirit, which is taken as the hallmark of the modern era, is an illusion. To be strictly modern, we must ignore what does not fit neatly into the separate categories of matter and spirit, mundane and sacred, nature and culture. He argues that as moderns we can only pretend to uphold this strict division, because we must simultaneously live in a world where, frankly, the division does not hold. This is Tanaka’s (2002) moment of enchantment that has survived

²² Recall that Weber (1930) suggests that a disenchanted world results in deep spiritual isolation and profound inner loneliness. Science does not address issues of meaning and the deep nature of being.

the process of modernity's disenchantment and "throws knowledge and meaning back onto us" (57). Daily, lived experience pushes us to grasp for connection and meaning somewhere, to reconcile our felt-sense of the sacred with modernity's disenchanted premise. Latour (1993) calls this the *middle* and is where people actually live their lives.

Everything happens in the middle, everything passes between the two, everything happens by way of mediation, translation and networks, but this space does not exist, it has no place. It is the unthinkable...of the modern." (37)

The modern paradox is that while modernity claims to be disenchanted, peoples' lived experiences are not. And so, enchanted experience finds no place in the structure of modernity, yet modern individuals, because they are individuals, find no place in the collective structure of the traditional cultures from which the premises of neo-shamanism are drawn. Neo-shamanism is, thus, the stretching and re-shaping of traditional shamanism into something new.

This is akin to the "complicated intercultural zone" Sahlins (1993:13) discusses in his article "Goodbye to *Tristes Tropes*." He suggests that in the process of the movement of capitalist forms into traditional culture, *modernity is indigenized*: "...the capitalist forms in these alien contexts acquire novel local accents" (Sahlins 1993: 13). That is to say, novel items and ideas are pressed into the service of Own culture: foreign commodities serve to enrich native self-conceptions, they use them to create "their own culture on a bigger and better scale" (Sahlins 1993: 17). This has always been a function of culture, and is exactly what practitioners and participants of modern shamanism are doing: traditional shamanism arrives at the doorstep of modern culture, but before it can come in it must be transformed in a way that serves modernity and fits into it. Just as traditional societies indigenize modernity when they press novel items into the service of

their own culture, modern individuals press traditional shamanism into the service of themselves, resulting in an *enchanted modernity*.

With Sahlin's words in mind, consider the common criticism levied upon modern shamanism: it is simply the stealing and selling Native Spirituality, reducing a complex system of symbols "to a flat, generalized commodity appropriate for everyone" (Donaldson 1999: 692). While this criticism stands to the extent that shamanism is commodified and as a result deflects attention away from the plight of Native peoples in today's world, it warrants a more inclusive perspective. The key element of my thesis is that neo-shamanism is a *contemporary* cultural phenomenon in which traditional shamanic techniques and ideas are *transformed* into a constellation of techniques, practices, and beliefs about the nature of illness and the best way to heal it. It is a re-working of traditional shamanism in a *modern context*, for *modern individuals*, that is, for the "self." This is the converse of Sahlin's (1993) indigenization of modernity, in which:

The first commercial impulse of the people is not to become just like us but more like themselves. They turn foreign goods to the service of domestic ideas, to the objectification of their own relations and notions of the good life. (17)

In the same way, modern individuals press the traditional shamanic enchanted worldview into the service of the self. This serves modern culture, making us more like "us."

Modern shamanism reifies the self.

Neo-shamanism can be considered from this perspective, not as a bastardization of some idealized form of traditional shamanism, but as a cultural phenomenon in its own right—one that offers a way to *enchant* modernity. It is a framework in which modern individuals can navigate the modern paradox. While neo-shamanism is criticized as being frivolous and imaginary and largely ignored by the academe because "it is thought to be

harmless or irrelevant or downplayed because it is eccentric, fringe and laughable, of not interest to serious scholarship” (Wallis 2000: 260), this research demonstrates that modern shamanism is a serious undertaking of some individuals. It provides healing of a type not available in the medical institutions of modernity.

Additionally, I argue that the most productive perspective from which to study a cultural phenomenon that takes people back and forth between the modern premises of their society and their enchanted lived personal experiences is that of experiential engagement.

There is much yet to be investigated concerning neo-shamanism both in general and as a healing system alternative to biomedicine. The research reported here opens the door to further interest in and investigation of healing in modern society: where biomedicine and contemporary psychotherapy fall short and how people seek to answer their need for meaning, holism, and healing beyond the physical. Further research ideas include a larger scale social investigation to determine the parameters of the population of those engaged in neo-shamanism, more specific investigation of what draws people to neo-shamanic practice and the character of their engagement over time, the use of neo-shamanism by biomedical practitioners, the efficacy of modern shamanism in healing, why it is effective, and the tools to measure such, and the role of enchantment in healing

APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY

Core Creative: Ray & Anderson's (2000) term for individuals concerned with living an authentic life, learning through an intimate engagement with "rich, visceral, sensory stuff of life" and direct, personal experience. They have a well-developed social conscience, an interest in self-actualization and spirituality, and are likely to utilize alternative medicines. They account for 12% of US population.

Core-shamanism: Michael Harner's (1980) version of shamanism for modern society made popular in his book *The Way of the Shaman*. Harner translated what he considered (nearly) universal traditional shamanic elements into an acultural package of practices for the modern shamanic seeker and participant.

Detraditionalized Self: A term used to refer to the "modern self," in contrast to the traditional (premodern) individual. Heelas (1996) suggests that the modern individual is detraditionalized: i.e., seeks autonomous self-cultivation, aspires to ground identity within, and desires to exercise independence, authority, choice, and expressivity. This modern sense of self does not belong to an overarching system but is informed by it.

Disenchantment/Enchantment/Re-enchantment: Weber (1946) suggested that modernity disenchanting the world, i.e., that in the process of modernity, science and rationality replaced magical means to implore the spirits, resulting in the Cartesian

differentiation of matter and spirit. Neo-shamanism, ostensibly based on traditional (pre-modern) shamanism, rests on the premise of an enchanted world, and neo-shamanic participants may find their world becomes re-enchanted as a result of their engagement with such.

Experiential Participation: A research method in which the researcher approaches the study of unseen (to outsiders) experiences by personally engaging in those experiences.

Extra-material: An unseen (or spiritual) realm external to self for which (neo)shamans employ an altered state of consciousness to apprehend. Also referred to as “nonordinary reality.” The neo-shamanic worldview holds that the extra-material world is as real as the material; the physical and spiritual are merged and can be utilized to assist humans.

Intrusion/Extraction: A (neo)shamanic disease etiology/therapeutic modality. An intrusion is a piece of foreign energy lodged in the patient’s “luminous body” (energy field, or spiritual self), and tends to manifest in acute physical symptoms, which can become chronic. Intrusions can be the result of sorcery (purposeful mal-intent) or a side effect of negative thought forms, which, modern shamanism teaches, are real and external to self. The (neo)shamanic practitioner locates these intrusions and extracts them, disposing of them in a way that will neutralize their negative energy, like sending them to a body of water, placing them in fire, or burying them in the ground.

Limited Holism: The phrase Baer (2003) uses to refer to a holism which emerged out of the Holistic Health movement, in which the focus on individual responsibility for health disregards society and its institutions as factors in illness, providing an “alternative form of medical hegemony by reinforcing individualizing patterns in U.S. society” (240).

Mesa: The *mesa* is an animated workspace, including objects used in shamanic practice.

While mesa is a specific cultural term referring to the spiritual altar of the traditional Northern Peruvian shamanic practitioner as described by Glass-Coffin (1998) and Joralemon and Sharon (1993), it is used in this dissertation to refer to any dedicated, animated curing space or altar used by modern shamanic practitioners and participants.

Neo-shamanism: Neo-shamanism is the application and practice of shamanic techniques in contemporary Western society and functions as a system of healing alternative to biomedicine. It is also sometimes called contemporary shamanism, American shamanism, and modern shamanism.

Nonordinary Reality: See “extra-material”

Participant-observation: The combination of participating in the daily life of the culture or group being researched while at the same time observing and recording observations. The hallmark method of anthropological fieldwork.

Participating Consciousness: A term used by Berman (1981) to refer to an assumed premodern merger and identification with one’s material and extra-material surroundings

Scientific Consciousness: Berman’s (1981) term to refer to the “alienated consciousness” of modernity: “there is no ecstatic merger with nature, but rather total separation from it” (17).

Shamanic Journey: The seminal neo-shamanic tool: it entails accessing an altered state of consciousness, usually through auditory driving (drumming or rattling) while sitting still or lying down, in which the shamanic practitioner travels into nonordinary reality in order to get information for healing.

Shamanic Sight: The ability to sense the extra-material world. This may be akin to “seeing” an aura around a person, place, or object, or to “hearing” information about someone or some thing.

Soul Loss/Soul Retrieval: A cross-cultural shamanic disease category and therapeutic modality: an individual can lose part of his or her soul (thus his or her vital essence) as a result of trauma or interpersonal relationships. Symptoms associated with soul loss are depression, fatigue, a feeling that part of self is missing, addiction, chronic disease, and immune deficiency problems. The neo-shamanic practitioner, with the help of spirits with whom he or she has developed a working relationship, finds the lost soul part(s) and brings it back to the patient, blowing it back into the body through the heart and the crown of the head.

APPENDIX B

POPULAR LITERATURE (listed alphabetically by author last name)

The Sorcerer's Crossing: A Woman's Journey by Tasha Abelar

The Spell of the Sensuous by David Abram

Medicine Woman by Lynn V. Andrews

The Four Fold Way: Walking the Paths of the Warrior, Teacher, Healer, and Visionary
by Angeles Arrien, PhD

Satsun: My Apprenticeship with a Maya Healer by Rosito Arvigo with Nadine Epstein

Black Elk: The Sacred Ways of a Lakota by Wallace Black Elk and William S. Lyon

The Secret by Rhonda Byrne

Crossing into Medicine Country: A Journey into Native American Healing by David Carson

The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowing (the entire series) by Carlos Castaneda

The Songlines by Bruce Chatwin

Shamanism as a Spiritual Practice for Daily Life by Tom Cowan

Plant Spirit Medicine by Elliot Cowan

Coyote's Council Fire: Contemporary Shamans on Race, Gender, and Community by Loren Cruden

Shabono: A True Adventure in the Remote and Magical Heart of the South American Jungle by Florinda Donner

Vision Circle: Shaman Dreamers of the Crystal Cave by Jeff Farwell

Ecstatic Body Postures: An Alternate Reality Workbook by Belinda Gore

The Way of the Shaman by Michael Harner

Gift of the Dreamtime: Awakening to the Divinity of Trauma by S. Kelley Harrell

The Fruitful Darkness by Joan Halifax

Shamanic Journeying: A Beginner's Guide by Sandra Ingerman

Medicine for the Earth: How to Transform Personal and Environmental Toxins by Sandra Ingerman

Soul Retrieval: Mending the Fragmented Self by Sandra Ingerman

Shaking Out the Spirits: A Psychotherapist's Entry into the Healing Mysteries of Global Shamanism by Bradford Keeney

American Shaman: An Odyssey of Global Healing Traditions by Jeffery A. Kottler and Jon Carlson, with Bradford Keeney

Urban Shaman: A Handbook for Personal and Planetary Transformation Based on the Hawaiian Way of the Adventurer by Serge Kahili King, PhD

The Tao of Equus: A Woman's Journey of Healing and Transformation Through the Way of the Horse by Linda Kohanov

Sacred Ground by Mercedes Lackey

Wizard of the Upper Amazon: the Story of Manuel Córdova-Rios by F. Bruce Lamb

Extraordinary Knowing: Science, Skepticism, and the Inexplicable Powers of the Human Mind by Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer, PhD

The Archaic Revival by Terrence McKenna

Mutant Message Down Under by Marlo Morgan

Urban Shaman (trilogy) by C.E. Murphy

The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge by Jeremy Narby

Breaking Open the Head: a Psychedelic Journey into the Heart of Contemporary Shamanism by Daniel Pinchbeck

2012: the Return of Quetzalcoatl by Daniel Pinchbeck

Secrets of the Talking Jaguar: Memoirs from the Living Heart of a Mayan Village by Martin Prechtel

Iboga: the Visionary Root of African Shamanism by Vincent Ravalec, Mallendi, and Agnes Paicheler

The Four Agreements: a Toltec Wisdom Book by don Miguel Ruiz

Modern Shamanic Living: New Explorations of an Ancient Path by Evelyn C. Rysdyk

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Shamanism by Gini Graham Scott, PhD

Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman by Malidoma Patrice Some

The Holographic Universe by Michael Talbot

Blinding Light by Paul Theroux

Shaman, Healer, Sage: How to Heal Yourself and Others with the Energy Medicine of the Americas by Alberto Villoldo, PhD

Dance of the Four Winds: Secrets of the Inca Medicine Wheel by Alberto Villoldo and Erik Jendresen

Healing States: a Journey into the World of Spiritual Healing and Shamanism by Alberto Villoldo, PhD, and Stanley Krippner, PhD

The World of Shamanism: New Views of an Ancient Tradition by Roger Walsh, MD, PhD

Traveling Between the Worlds: Conversations with Contemporary Shamans by Hillary S. Webb

MedicineMaker: Mystic Encounters on the Shaman's Path by Hank Wesselman

The Journey to the Sacred Garden: A Guide to Traveling in the Spiritual Realms Hank Wesselman, PhD

The Reluctant Shaman: A Woman's First Encounters with the Unseen Spirits of the Earth by Kay Cordell Whitaker

Ayahuasca: the Visionary and Healing Powers of the Vine of the Soul by Joan Parisi
Wilcox

The Eagle's Quest: A Physicist Finds Scientific Truth at the Heart of the Shamanic World
Fred Alan Wolf

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