

Pulled Up Short with Stanton Wortham

Do Witches Exist?

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Stanton Wortham 00:08

Welcome to Pulled Up Short. This is a podcast that's devoted to a particular kind of activity, where we're told some new perspectives on things that cause us to stop to be pulled up short and think a little bit about something that we believed but which turns out not to be true, or at least that we need to reconsider based on some new information that we've been given.

This is an important thing to do. It requires that we recognize deeply held presuppositions that we entertain the possibility that our typical ways of understanding are incomplete or distorting, we need to be open to questions and alternative formulations of basic issues that we tend to take for granted. We have to be willing to consider alternative ways of thinking. This requires a commitment, imagination to seeing the world in new ways, a commitment to systematically inquiring based on evidence and reason wherever it leads, a commitment to being open to moving beyond dogmatism, and considering alternative beliefs and practices, a commitment to conversation to listening deeply to others and inquiring jointly.

So in each episode, we're going to hear from someone who has an insight or something we don't typically think about that requires us to be pulled up short, to rethink something that we tend to take for granted. And we hope that you will enjoy.

Samantha Ha 01:36

My name is Samantha Ha, and you're listening to the first episode of Pulled Up Short. Today we'll be featuring Stanton Wortham, who is the Dean of the Lynch School at Boston College, and a linguistic anthropologist and educational ethnographer. We also have Usha Tummala-Narra with us, who will be responding and reacting to Stanton Wortham's insights. Thanks to everybody, for joining us today. Dean Wortham, I'm really looking forward to hearing the idea you brought to us today to convince you

that witches exist, or at least that the belief in witchcraft is a rational belief. And I'm going to do it by telling you a little bit about a classic anthropological study that was done by a British anthropologist named Evans Pritchard about 100 years ago in North Central Africa, among a group called the

Azande. So a belief in witchcraft--which is something not just limited to this particular part of the world, but it's something that still I'm sure over a billion people in the world believe in witchcraft in the sense that we're going to discuss it--this is a belief that I think you should consider to be rational, in the same way that many of our beliefs in scientific propositions are rational.

So among the Azande, witchcraft is understood to be something that has no external sign. Witchcraft doesn't involve warts and greenskin and things that anybody could be a witch, you could be a witch, and you might not know it. Witchcraft is inherited from the same sex parent. So it's something that's passed down from generation to generation. The act of witchcraft is a psychological act, meaning that we all experience unpleasant emotions toward other people like hatred or jealousy. Witchcraft is the capacity to turn your hatred or jealousy into an actual tangible consequence in the world for another person.

So to be bewitched means some person who has the capacity, who is a witch, has a thought that involv

So this is what witchcraft explains: it explains when something bad happens, a connection between you and an unfortunate event. They say that when something like this happens, it could be because a witch has had ill thoughts towards you. And those thoughts caused the bad luck on your part. So Evans Pritchard tells a particular story about a young man who one day was running through the forest. And he cut his toe on a root that was sticking up out of the path. And the toe, subsequently the cut got infected, and he went to Evans Pritchard, and he said to Evans Pritchard, look, somebody bewitched me, that's why my toe is looking like this. And Evans Pritchard explained to him about microbiology, you know, and infections and so forth and so on and explained that there were other explanations for why it was his toe had gotten infected. And the young man understood some of what he was saying, but he said, Well, I've cut my toe 50 times in that forest, and it's never been infected before. So why did it get infected this time. And of course, from Evans Pritchard's point of view, for most of our point of view, you don't have to explain that, you know, it's just an accident, there are bacteria everywhere, every time you cut your skin, bacteria get in there. But this time, there just happened to be more of them. Or it was a particularly virulent type of bacteria that got in there. But from the perspective of the young man, we had to explain the fact that it was infected this time and not the other times.

It's important to recognize about witchcraft, that this young man and all people who believe in witches in this sense, they are not awestruck, or terrified. If you are, I actually believed that a witch had bewitched us and something terrible had happened to us because of it, we would be horrified. We'd be terrified. We wouldn't know what to do. But in this case, they are not awestruck. Witchcraft is an everyday occurrence. They are not terrified that witches have limited capacity. They're annoyed, they think it's impertinent. It's a nasty thing that some nasty person had evil thoughts toward them. What did he do to deserve such evil thoughts that caused him this infection? So witchcraft happens all the time, your neighbors may be witches, you could be a witch and not understand it. And these sorts of negative thoughts have real effects like this particular infection, and this little boy was pissed.

Samantha Ha 08:00

Yeah. So I see. And can you help me understand? Does this mean that in this account, that witchcraft, this ability to cause harm from negative thoughts, could it explain everything? Could it explain anything and everything?

Stanton Wortham 08:16

Well, that's a good question that they have quite clear limitations about what witchcraft can and can't explain. So for example, if a child leaves the hen house door open, and hands get out and an animal eats them, the child cannot blame witchcraft for that carelessness, or that incompetence. Telling lies, committing adultery, stealing things cannot be explained away by witchcraft. You just can't say, gosh, you know, I was bewitched. And that's why I told that lie, or that's why I stole that thing. So it explains when specific things happen to people the coincidence between humans and ill effects that happened that weren't their fault. They understand perfectly well that sometimes people are evil and

do evil things. And sometimes people make mistakes. And that can't be witchcraft. It's when you sort of did everything right. There was nothing that you were doing that was wrong, but still something bad happened to you.

Let me give you another example. These people were farmers, they kept their grain stored in wooden granaries that were on stilts to keep them away from insects up above the ground. It's hot there. In the middle of the day in the summertime, they would take naps underneath the granaries because it was a shady place out in the field. So one day there was a big hullabaloo because one of the granaries had collapsed. And there was a man who had been taking a nap under it and he was killed by the force of the greenery falling on him. The whole village went running out to see what had happened. Evans Pritchard too, and there was a general consensus that this had been a witch that the man who got killed had been bewitched. Somebody thought ill of him and that's why the greenery collapsed on him.

Evans Pritchard examined the site, and he discovered that termites had eaten through the legs of this granary. And he quite triumphantly went to the people and showed them and said, look, it was termites. You don't need witches to explain what happened here. Termites did it. You guys know about termites. And so they examined the evidence, and they agreed with him. Yeah, you're right, termites ate through the legs of this granary. But then they asked him, why did it collapse while this man was underneath it. And, of course, from the point of view of Evans Pritchard, from our point of view you don't have to explain that it could have collapsed anytime it happened to collapse when he was under it. That was bad luck. But you don't have to use a witch to explain that it just happened. From the perspective of the Azande, this was a crucial piece of evidence that we need in order to explain what it is that happened. So from our perspective, if people try to dismiss things that we think are crucial pieces of evidence, we get very upset about it. And they were upset with him for refusing to explain why it was that it happened when the man happened to be underneath the particular granary.

Samantha Ha 11:07

Yeah, that makes sense. You're right. And when you said that, as soon as you mentioned the idea of termites, I was like, oh, that's it. That was the explanation. But you're right, I'd never made the next, the next jump that you mentioned. Do you have another example that could help me unpack this as well?

Stanton Wortham 11:26

Yeah, so they would explain all different kinds of things that happened to individuals as the result of witches. As I say, there was an example there of a man who did all the things he was supposed to do to make a piece of pottery. So pottery is vulnerable to cracking when you fire it, when you heat it in order to get it to harden. And often pieces of product, we will crack at that stage. And so you have to get all the grit out of the clay mixture. And in this place, you have to engage in certain rituals beforehand, you have to avoid eating certain kinds of food beforehand, and so forth and so on. And

in this particular case, the man did all the things that he should do, you're supposed to abstain from these kinds of

looking at the world does not. And vice versa, our way of understanding illuminates some aspects that theirs does not. And you have to live with the fact that the world might be more complicated than we think it is not just our view of it, and we understand the truth and nobody else does. It's that we understand some aspects of it, and they understand others.

Samantha Ha [22:05](#)

Yeah, thank you. This has been very provocative. And I'm wondering at this point, maybe I can invite Dr. Tummala-Narra to comment with any of your reactions or questions you might have, and open it up for dialogue.

Usha Tummala-Narra [22:22](#)

Sure, I am so delighted to hear Dr. Wortham talk about witches. And, and Sam, as you were saying, these are like the associations we have as d~

You know those are several good examples

societies we tend to, we tend not to fit with those things very well, we tend to kind of, you know sort of work towards getting rid of those actually, rather than trying to have them be present in some way for us to deal with. And so I wonder if there's something going on with that as well?

Stanton Wortham 29:22

Yeah, it is true that societies or cultures have different ways of managing emotions or universal things. The different societies seem to have different articulations of them. So people, you know, the French are good at ennui, and we had to learn it from them. And people in different places have somewhat different emotional reactions, but still everybody has emotions, and the society is willing to allow you to express them or not express them differently. And I think you're right that some of those negative emotions are less appropriate. Of course in our society that depends on who you are. It's gendered. So certain sorts of emotions can be articulated more by men or women appropriately, and it's contextual. So at a football game, you can yell and scream and hate and it's allowed. Whereas you might not be allowed to do it at other times. As a male person, I'm grateful for football so I can have emotions at least three hours a week, you know? So context matters in this case.

Samantha Ha 30:20

All right, well, I'm sorry to cut off such a rich conversation. But it's the hope that these episodes continue to stimulate ongoing conversations afterwards as well. So with that said, that's the end of our episode for today. And we hope that this episode of Pulled Up Short around witches-- thank you, Dean Wortham-- gave you reason to pause and reimagine some of your assumptions. We hope you can join us next time for our next episode of Pulled Up Short.