

Pulled Up Short with Stanton Wortham

Do Witches Exist?

Featuring Stanton Wortham with Samantha Ha (guest host) and Usha Tummala-Narra (commentator)

Original Air Date: April 12, 2021

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 today for our episode. Would you mind getting us started?

Stanton Wortham 02:14

Thanks, Sam, we appreciate your hosting this episode. So today, I'm going to try 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 involves hatred, jealousy, or some other negative emotion toward you, and that that has a real effect in the world, that something bad happens to you in response. They don't cast spells and have particular intentions to harm you in particular ways. They just don't like you, they think bad thoughts towards you, and they have a capacity to cause real action in the world. So among the Azande, witchcraft has a power that increases in proximity, they will move entire villages to get away from people that they believe are a witch.

Samantha Ha 04:16

Wow. So of course, it's the eve of Halloween. So when you said witchcraft, I automatically thought of exactly that, the witch with green skin and warts. But it seems that witchcraft in this sense seems to be more expansive than that. I was wondering if you could say more about that? What makes this different than our common sense notion of witchcraft?

Stanton Wortham 04:41

So witchcraft, as Hollywood has spun it out, is of course a specific thing, that in most parts of the world, witchcraft is seen as one kind of explanation for experience. What witchcraft explains the relationship between people and bad events. So, among the Azande, sometimes bad stuff happens to good people. Sometimes you have a bad crop, you do everything right and planting your crop and raising your crop and tending it. But it doesn't produce the grain that you expect. Sometimes you go on a hunt, and there's just no game, there are no animals to hunt, and so you come home and you have to go hungry. They often would bail water out of pools in the river in the dry season, it would end up being not a river, but just pools of water and the fish would be trapped in a pool in a basin. And the way they would fish is they would literally bail the water out of one of these pools, one of these deep spots in the river and there would be fish trapped at the bottom. Sometimes you can't see at the beginning how many fish are in there. Sometimes you bail water out all day, and there are no fish. And there are only a couple of fish because you picked a bad spot.

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 cardan. 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 food and other behaviors the day before, he did everything, right, but still, the pottery breaks. So that's something that can be explained with respect to witches.

Samantha Ha 12:17

So I think in some ways, you've convinced me, right? So if I'm to believe that witchcraft is rational, well, how would you describe maybe the implications of this idea for me? How do I better understand whether a belief is rational or irrational? Because up until this point, I kind of thought that witchcraft was irrational. So what implications does this have for me or other listeners?

Stanton Wortham 12:43

Well, I think that's most of our reactions, that before I started studying this issue, I thought that people who believed in witches were less rational than I am. And I thought that they probably believed it, because somebody told them to some authority figure told them they should believe it, and that they didn't have good reason other than somebody told them that they should. Or I probably, I confess, that I thought that they didn't really understand the world, like they didn't have a scientific understanding. And since they couldn't understand some things, they had to make up explanations, like witches, that obviously aren't true.

But now that I've thought it through, it seems to me that the belief in witchcraft is, in some ways, qualitatively similar to a belief in many objects that we hold dear, that we have scientific theories about. So for example, we believe in atoms, I believe that everything including us, is made up of atoms. Now, I've never seen an atom, in principle, you can't see atoms, they claim that they can see very large atoms with certain sorts of electron microscopes. But the vast majority of atoms can't be seen, in principle, they're too small, because there's no way to get a visualization down at that level. And the reason I believe in them is because there's a series of inferences from the things I can see that scientific experiments can show us back to the idea that atoms must underlie what's going on in reality.

Evolution is similar. So we have this notion that over very long periods of historical time, that animals evolved from one form into another, and that all the diversity and the remarkable, apparent design of life, and its adaptive capacity, results from these many years of evolution. And we all know those kinds of theories, they can't see evolution in action. We can't live over millions of years to see how one species turns into another. But we claim we have evidence, we have fossils, and we have different accounts of genetics. And so we believe in evolution, even though you can't directly see it. Other things like personality or love, are also things you can't see you infer from what you can see to the fact that somebody has a certain kind of personality. So witches are the same way. Witches is our belief, it's something that we claim about reality, but you can't see them directly. So you have to infer from other things, like the fact that that granary happened to fall on that man when he was lying underneath there. And what goes on is that your own beliefs are things that look directly visible to you. So it seems to me that atoms are obvious facts about the world, even though I can't directly see

them. And I'm actually taking on faith, several things that allowed me to infer from what I can see to the existence of atoms. And it's the same with witches, you can't directly see that someone is a witch. But you can see bad stuff happening to good people, and you infer just like we do with atoms through a series of propositions that witches must exist.

Samantha Ha 15:38

So now we're going to bring in some of our commentators soon. But to kind of wrap us all together. Could you say a little bit about what you think the greater benefit it is of seeing witchcraft as rational? What should we take away from this insight?

Stanton Wortham 15:57

Well, I think we need to see that other people who have beliefs and things that we don't believe in, like witches have good reason to believe what they believe. In other words, their beliefs cite evidence. The difference is that we disagree on what evidence is relevant. So take the theory of evolution, I happen to believe the theory of evolution. One important piece of evidence for that belief is fossils. So fossils are a critical piece of evidence that let us see what extinct species looked like and how they went through intermediate stages to get to the species we see today. Now, if someone were to show up and tell me, oh, I don't have to explain fossils, fossils, or just you know, I don't care about those things. I don't have to explain those. I'd be upset because that's a critical piece of evidence for my theory. Now, because they feel the same way when Evans Pritchard tells them oh, I don't have to explain why that man was under that granary when it fell. It's not relevant, you know, I just don't think that's relevant. Now, why is it that Evans Pritchard thinks it's not relevant, it's because he has a theory of the world that doesn't include witches, or anything like it. So he can't explain the coincidence of the granary falling when the man was under it, so he dismisses it as coincidence. Similarly, someone could dismiss fossils as just not relevant, because that individual can't explain them. And I feel that's cheating. Just like the Azande that Evans Pritchard are, we are cheating.

And, so we need, when we think about other people and their beliefs, we need to acknowledge that, in fact, other people are doing something that's qualitatively similar to what we're doing. They can't directly see that someone's a witch, just like we can't directly see atoms or personality or love. They're inferring from what they can see, to their belief that witches exist, just like we're inferring about atoms or evolution or personality. And we need to treat them with respect.

There's a tendency in anthropology, we call it developmentalism. There's a tendency to think that people with other beliefs, like in witchcraft, are developmentally behind us, that we in enlightened scientific, European oriented societies are more highly developed, we are more rational than they are. And that, I believe, is an unjust way of making sense of other people's belief systems.

There are, of course, plenty of people who believe crazy things for irrational reasons. I'm not saying all beliefs are the same. They're not. There are many beliefs. People who are psychotic believe the

walls are melting or something, and they're wrong, and the walls are not melting. They're misperceiving it because they're being irrational. And so there are lots of beliefs that are just not rational and we should not accept. But it is not true to say that Western enlightened scientific beliefs are correct. And people who have other beliefs, like the belief in witches, for example, are necessarily irrational that they're less fully developed than we are. And so what we need to do is we need to figure out how do you make sense of someone who has a belief like that, which for them make sense of some of their experience-- it explains why that man was under that granary and explains why that cup got infected when others don't. So it really explains things about the world. How do we relate to that if I personally do not believe in witches? But I do believe that a belief in witchcraft can be rational. So how do I reconcile the fact that I don't believe in it, but I do want to grant that some people do believe it, and I want to give them the benefit of the doubt that they believe it for reasonable reasons? They believe it because there is evidence and it does make some sense of their experience.

And before wrapping this up, I want to caution us against one common misconception. People often say a belief in witches is just their way of seeing the world and it's just different than our way of seeing the world just like I don't like tomatoes. Most people like tomatoes. I don't like raw tomatoes. I love cooked tomatoes, but I won't eat a raw tomato. And so I just don't like it and there's nothing you can do to convince me raw tomatoes are awesome. Believe me, many people have tried, I've been fed all sorts of tomatoes. I don't like them. So people often say that a belief in witches is non rational, it's not irrational, but it's not rational. It's just non rational. Just like the fact that I don't like tomatoes is non rational, I can't really give you evidence for it, it's just I don't like them.

Now, we can't do that, because to cast their belief in witches, as if it's non rational. If it's something we can't have, we can't cite evidence and have reasonable arguments about is to treat them as if there's something wrong with them. It's to treat them as if their beliefs are different than our beliefs--because I don't believe that my belief in atoms or my belief in evolution or my belief in personality, I don't think that's non rational. It's not something I just choose to believe, I believe in atoms, because atoms really exist. And we have good evidence for it. And they make sense of my experience in a lot of important ways. And for people who believe in witches, it's exactly the same. They think it makes sense of their experience. They have evidence that we can't explain that they can explain to support their belief...So we can't say that someone else's belief is just a matter of taste, that it feels like you can be really tolerant if you just say, oh, believe in witches, that's great, that's awesome for you, I don't believe in them, you believe in them. I don't like tomatoes, you like tomatoes, whatever. It's not like that. You have to take seriously their claim that witches exist, and they make sense of stuff. And they need to take seriously our claims that we believe in atoms, or personality or evolution or whatever it is that we hold dear as our beliefs.

So you're in a position when you're confronting a different way of understanding the world, that their way of looking at the world might illuminate some aspects of experience that our way 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 is like that green face with a pointy hat. And, and I think everything that you have talked about Dr. Wortham is very... it pushes us to think deeper about what this really means. I always find it interesting how Western positivism in science tends to kind of focus heavily on what's observable, and what we can see. And you're helping us to think about what is it that we can't see, and how do we understand those things?

But I also find it contradictory. I've always thought that the positivism of Western science kind of assumes that somehow, you know, people's thoughts can't influence events, you know, in one direction, in one sense that somehow and we do this in psychology as well, where we tell, you know, people that in fact, your thoughts are your private thoughts, and they can't actually do anything to influence other people. And yet at the same time, we say to them, that they should have positive thoughts if they're coping with something stressful. And so it's interesting to me that negative thoughts can't seem to influence other people or events in the same way that positive thoughts sometimes are thought to, you know, change things. Negative thoughts can make internal changes, like you could feel more depressed or something like that if you have negative thoughts about yourself, but you can't change something outside of yourself based on those thoughts.

In religion, a lot of religious traditions, there's this belief in meditation, you know that, in fact, meditating on something that is peaceful or something positive can actually change what happens outside of yourself, in addition to maybe giving you some sense of inner peace-- like it can actually make change in your environment and influence. So I find it interesting that there's a way in which we have these kinds of so called irrational ways of thinking about human beings and their impact on other people, both in western science as well as in different religious traditions that are thought to be acceptable or normative...And when we see something like witchcraft or witches, it seems to somehow stir something up. I wonder if you can speak about that, like, why is it so, why does it feel so different to us, and so unacceptable to those of us who are conducting what we think is more typical positivistic science?

Stanton Wortham 25:26

You know, those are several good examples. Accusations about irrationality, I mean, all people everywhere think others are irrational in some ways. It's a very common thing to have people who have different beliefs than you to have a notion that they're not rational, they don't see reality, they're not considering evidence. And in the West, we've developed very complex forms of that which had to do with colonialism and how it is that societies believe that others elsewhere were less fully developed, were less fully human, and that we had evolved in certain societies to be more rational, more educated, better. And so this accusation about irrationality is a dangerous thing. You have to be very careful when you think that another person is being irrational. Not because it's not true, people are irrational all the time. And we, I think, should feel justified in claiming that lots of stuff that people believe including ourselves is not rational. And we should question it. But you have to be very careful, because there's a tendency for that to spill over into casting a whole group of people as not being rational.

And that's why I was trying to frame it as if we should not think of others as irrational and we shouldn't think of them as non rational either. They believe things for good reasons. Some of the stuff they believe just isn't true. Just like some of the stuff that people who have psychological disorders just isn't true. So we all believe some things that just aren't true. But some beliefs like the belief in witchcraft, I believe--another example is the belief in transmigration of souls, the notion that when people die, or when animals die, that the soul is reincarnated in another being and a future time--that explains stuff like child prodigies, you know. Why is it that Mozart was composing symphonies at age three? (Which he was, by the way, the symphonies at age three apparently weren't as good as the ones he composed when he was older.) But still, he was doing stuff at age three, that virtually no other human could do ever. And why was that? And on the theory of transmigration, it makes perfect sense, he was a musician in a prior life.

So transmigration or witchcraft, are belief systems that have a lot of history and evidence behind them, the belief that the walls are melting, or the belief that there's phlogiston, or that the sun goes around the Earth, those are beliefs that do not have a lot of evidence behind them. So we have to distinguish between rational and irrational. But my answer to your question about why it is that those of us who believe in western science often slide over into condemning certain sorts of beliefs is that it has to do with social dynamics, with these beliefs about others, with othering certain kinds of people as being not as good.

Usha Tummala-Narra 28:14

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I was thinking also about what we do about those negative thoughts that you are mentioning, that are so inherent to kind of the ideas around witches. You know, that witches are seen as people who have these negative thoughts that then get sort of transferred on to external events. And I was thinking about, what is it that we also do with people's emotional life, you know, the ability to have expression for things like hatred, and envy and jealousy? Sometimes, I wonder how limited we tend to feel maybe as individuals or societies in terms of how that gets expressed and understood. You know, that, in some ways, in rational and so called sort of rational

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.