Playful Practice in a New Age Community

Stephanie Betz

Abstract:
The New Age has often been described in the literature as an individualistic phenomenon that is resistant to the formation of stable groups.

The New Age movement has drawn much interest from both inside and outside the academic community due to its highly eclectic nature. Much of the academic scholarship to date has interpreted the New Age as an individualistic phenomenon, in part due to this eclectic character, and has hence focused upon exploring it in terms of socio-historical trends. My 2008 study of ‘Violet Cottage,’ a New Age community in ‘Camborne,’ led me to explore how community can be created within the New Age despite the diversity of individual beliefs. This paper argues that, although Violet Cottage demonstrates significant individual variation in belief, community is created through shared practices that are made possible through the playful suspension of disbelief.

I begin by briefly examining the existing New Age scholarship and its focus on individualism. I then introduce the salient aspects of Violet Cottage before briefly discussing some of the issues that arose from my placement within the community. I then introduce the problem as I encountered it in the course of my fieldwork, and present the concept of ‘play’ as a means for understanding how shared practices forms the basis of community within Violet Cottage.
Playful Practice in a New Age Community

The New Age

The New Age is notoriously difficult to delineate. As Hanegraaff (1998:1) notes, “in spite of the popularity of the term, its actual content remains extremely vague.” This is not only because it refers to a de-centralised, amorphous network of alternative spiritual beliefs and practices (York, 2001:364), but also because many of the people that it attempts to describe actively reject the term (Heelas, 1996:17). As a result, there is often considerable disparity among scholars regarding the definition of the New Age.

There are, however, a few characteristics that have found purchase within the spread of New Age scholarship. The first is the centrality of what Heelas (1996) describes as ‘Self-spirituality.’ Self-spirituality is the “monistic assumption that the Self itself is sacred,” (Heelas, 1996:2) and that “inner spirituality -- embedded within the self and the natural order as a whole -- serves as the key to moving from all that is wrong with life to all that is right.” This sacralisation of the Self is often accompanied by a strong emphasis on personal growth through the pursuit of spiritual knowledge.

A second dominant theme within the academic literature is the New Age's ethos of *bricolage*. Based upon the holistic assumption that all roads lead up the same mountain and all religions to the same ultimate source, the syncretic nature of the New Age, in which individuals are free to combine their choice of religious and secular representations to form a personalised spirituality, has historically been the phenomenon's most noted feature (see, for instance, Hanegraaff, 1998, 1999; Heelas, 1996; Luckmann, 1967; Lyon, 1993, 2000; Possamai, 2003, 2005; Redden, 2005; York, 1995, 2001).

This combination of Self-spirituality and individual syncretism has led the New Age to be characterised within the scholarship as an essentially individualistic phenomenon. Hanegraaff (1999:153), for example, argues that “New Age religion exemplifies the... radical phenomenon of private symbolism,” Possamai (2000:368) starkly states that New Agers are “the perfect individualists of religion,” and Bruce (2002:105) admits that he “cannot see how a shared faith can be created from a low-salience world of pick-and-mix religion.”

Heelas (1996:38, f.n.1) suggests that “perhaps only as few as 5 or 10 per cent of New Agers belong to and are faithful members of particular New Age organisations,” a statistic that may contribute to the fact that, as Heelas (1996:7) notes, “very few New Age organisations... have been studied by way of sustained participant-observation.” Instead, the majority of the scholarship has focused on explaining the recent popularity of the New Age by drawing upon macro-level trends in Western society.

The few studies that have concentrated upon the intricacies of New Age beliefs, values, and practices in everyday life have tended to retain an individualistic focus, examining loose networks of people rather than close-knit communities. My study of ‘Violet Cottage,’ involving extensive participant observation as well as interviews, goes some of the way towards reversing this unbalanced emphasis upon the individual
within contemporary New Age scholarship by exploring the formation of New Age community.

_Violet Cottage_

In 2008 I conducted fieldwork for my Honours thesis in the New Age community of ‘Violet Cottage.’ Founded by Sharon Roberts on June 30, 2004, the Violet Cottage community currently encompasses approximately forty members, of which twenty-five attend regularly and fifteen irregularly. Although Violet Cottage is ostensibly open to both men and women, the typical participant is a woman aged from thirty to fifty who is either married, separated or divorced, usually with two or more children, and who either doesn't work, or has a job in the service industry.

However, despite this similarity of background, the beliefs of the participants are diverse. In the syncretic fashion of the New Age, each Violet Cottage members holds a belief system that is an idiosyncratic mix of religious elements. These unique combinations can incorporate Wicca, Hinduism, quantum physics, Christianity, the Kabbalah, Native American spirituality, Buddhism, Jungian psychology, and Celtic spirituality among others. Table 1 below presents the profiles of the key participants, including a brief summary of some of their beliefs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Profile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>Founder and co-facilitator of Violet Cottage. Mid forties, married with two children, she identifies as Wiccan and practices Wicca, channelling, reiki, drumming, angelic healing, tarot, and women’s spirituality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renata</td>
<td>Co-facilitator of Violet Cottage. Late forties, married with two children, she identifies as a witch and practices witchcraft, tarot, dream work, pendulum divination, and psychic abilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>Mid forties and married with three children, she identifies as Wiccan and believes in Jesus, Mary, the Goddess, reincarnation, and the immanence of divinity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deb</td>
<td>Late forties, married with several children, she identifies as a witch and has no time for “heighty-flighty” magical theory. She practices witchcraft, reiki, tarot, and drumming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tania</td>
<td>Early forties, divorced with two children, she identifies as a witch, has an animal totem, practices witchcraft, yoga, and tarot, and has completed a pilgrimage to Stonehenge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linden</td>
<td>Mid forties, divorced with two children, she works as a legal secretary, identifies as a witch and practices her witchcraft through crochet. She has a strong relationship with her Native American spirit guides but does not believe in any God or Goddess.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Late thirties, married with one child, she works as a reiki practitioner and identifies as both Wiccan and a witch. She practices reiki, iridology and drumming, sees fairies and spirits, and has a strong affinity with dragons.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Kathleen

Mid forties and married, she is reluctant to identify with a label. She sees divinity as a genderless “source,” practices witchcraft and SoulCollage(tm), and runs a home-based business selling Goddess-inspired dolls of her own design and manufacture.

Table 1: Profiles of Key Participants

The practices that take place in the Cottage reflect this diversity of beliefs. Table 2, below, demonstrates the schedule of activities that took place for the majority of my fieldwork. In addition to these regular events, the Cottage also occasionally hosted activities that were organised by individual members, which could range from circle dancing classes to a birthday party for Krishna to charity fund-raising initiatives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>YAAD Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Tarot Drop-in and Class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Wednesday | *Around the Cauldron:*  
Native American Drumming, or  
Psychic Development, or  
Wiccan Discussion, or  
Reiki Energy Healing Circle |
| Thursday| YAAD Class                                    |
|         | Reiki Energy Healing Circle                   |
| Saturday| Craft Circle                                   |

Table 2: Schedule of Activities

The activity that has come to serve as the primary endeavour for the Cottage is the ‘Year and a Day Wiccan Education Programme’ (YAAD). Wicca is a relatively recent religion, popularised in 1954 by Gerald Gardner, that is partially based upon a reconstruction of pre-Christian Celtic myth and religion. Although Wicca is often conflated with witchcraft they are separate practices that can, but do not necessarily, co-exist. Although the YAAD courses were described as Wiccan education, however, the programme covers a wide range of topics that fall outside Wiccan religion, including Aboriginal spirituality, Jungian psychology, the Kabbalah, and many others.

The other major activity within Violet Cottage was the ‘Around the Cauldron’ night, which rotated between four distinct themes: Native American drumming, psychic development, Wiccan discussion, and reiki healing. Native American drumming was a drumming circle facilitated by a man of Native American descent that incorporated Goddess chants and energy-raising techniques derived from witchcraft. Psychic development was a class designed to teach the basics of psychic ability. Each night would focus on a different ability, and over the course of my fieldwork covered ghost-hunting, dowsing with rods and pendulums, remote viewing, telepathy, lucid dreaming, and psychometry.
Wiccan discussion nights involved an organised discussion of a particular theological topic, and over the course of my fieldwork included the subjects of death, birth, the soul, the Higher Self, reincarnation, karma, and the seasonal rituals (Sabbats). The reiki healing circle was an organised sharing of a Japanese form of energy healing. Each participant would take turns to lie down on their backs and close their eyes while the other members of the group would lay their hands on them and administer healing energy in the way they felt directed by their intuition.

Placement within Violet Cottage

I wasn’t a stranger to the Violet Cottage community when I approached Sharon, founder and chief facilitator, about the possibility of conducting fieldwork for my Honours thesis. I had attended Violet Cottage’s women’s circle for approximately nine months in 2005, some two years previously. When I contacted Sharon she was not only happy for me to engage in fieldwork, she said that she’d known that I was going to return. “You are meant to be here,” she said, “This is where you need to be at this point in your path. You have something to learn from us.”

This narrative, repeated by Sharon during my preliminary meeting with the collective women of the community, gave me my initial positioning within Violet Cottage. Not only did it act as an implicit endorsement of me from Sharon, it also located me within the sacred cosmos of Violet Cottage. By explicitly positioning me upon my own spiritual path, I had a spiritual presence within Violet Cottage that transcended my academic reasons for being there.

However, this declaration also positioned me within competing hierarchies of age/experience and education. By stating that I was there to learn from them as a part of my spiritual path, I immediately occupied a novice-like role, something that was not helped by my relatively youthful age. Over the course of my fieldwork I would frequently be asked my age, and it would often be noted, upon my answer, that I was the same age as one of their children. However, this position was countermanded by my degree of learning. Having obtained a university degree, I was more highly educated than most of the Cottage's members. This elevated me in their eyes, and I frequently found myself approached as though I were an endless font of knowledge, often delving into areas -- flags, pronunciation of various foreign words, the Kabbalah -- that I knew nothing about. My inability to answer their questions did not seem to deter the asking of them, and even the facilitators of groups would turn to me and ask me to validate something that they had said.

Both of these positions helped to shape the information that was shared with me. Being positioned as a novice at first limited the scope of my study. Although the women of Violet Cottage were extremely generous with their time and insights, I often felt that they were attempting to protect me from certain aspects of their lives. My reluctance to engage in sexual humour gave me the reputation of being innocent, and the content of conversations would sometimes be restricted, explicitly drawing upon my presence as the reason. However, as I actively engaged in Violet Cottage this sense of innocence slowly receded, and my acceptance of the women gained me the reputation of being wiser than my years would suggest. This seemed to open the way for frank discussion on subjects that were previously deflected, and the Violet Cottage women began to discuss a wider range of their life experiences.
Although my position as something like an endless font of theoretical knowledge was something that I considered unfortunate many times, particularly when I felt embarrassed about being asked to validate the information that the course facilitator was teaching, it did prove useful over the course of my fieldwork. My positioning allowed me to attend many events that were restricted to people who had completed the first year of the YAAD programme provided by the Cottage, enabling me to draw upon a wider range of events for my fieldwork than I otherwise would have had access to.

My position within these competing hierarchies meant that I was not able to achieve my initial, and perhaps somewhat naïve hopes of attaining a level of equality with the women. However, as uncomfortable as occupying two distinct positions could be at times, I believe that I managed to achieve an uneasy balance that enabled the participants to relate to me in the way they felt most comfortable with at the time. It is not and could never substitute for equality, but I am not certain that true equality can ever be established in a study that has inherent power relationships.

The theme that I eventually chose for my ethnography, and subsequently this article, is partially the product of the relationship between researcher and researched that developed over the course of my fieldwork. An academic outsider at first, I eventually became an accepted member of the community through my participation. This transition allowed me some insight into the meaning that Violet Cottage holds for its members, and enabled me to reinterpret some of the community’s more confusing aspects in light of my own experience, as well as the comments and insights of the Violet Cottage members.

Formulation of the Problem
When I first began my fieldwork in Violet Cottage I was bewildered by the range of activities that took place, and even more confused when I realised that the participants routinely engaged in activities of which they were explicitly sceptical and to which they had little religious attachment. At the close of the annual Yule ritual, I asked Diana and Marlene why they attended the seasonal rituals and what they found meaningful in them. Diana shrugged, smiled in a sheepish sort of way, and then confided, “I like being around people who believe in the same sorts of things that I do, doing the same sorts of things with them.” I asked if the actual content of the ritual was important, and she shrugged again before saying, “It's just doing the ritual, really.” Marlene, standing beside her, agreed, and said, “It's just being with like-minded people.” Many comments similar to these were made throughout the course of my fieldwork. In an interview with Deb, she said:

I don't believe in spell-craft. When I first started with all of this I did full moon prosperity rituals, but none of it worked. I don't do it at home anymore because it just never worked for me, but I do it here because it's fun.

Brighid similarly did not attend the Cottage rituals in order to engage with their religious component. Indeed, she found that the rituals that she conducted at home were more effective than those at the Cottage because she is able to engage in meditation there.
Brighid: I'm really into celebrating the Sabbats, the earth, the Full Moons, and stuff. [...] I come to the Cottage for Sabbat rituals, but... I have an altar at home that I use for the Sabbats, and I often do rituals at home. I can be more centred there, and do meditation. We don't do meditation before ritual here.

Steph: So why do you keep coming to the Cottage Sabbat rituals?

Brighid: I feel really comfortable here, and I fit in with the people here.

In both of these examples, and in many other comments made by Violet Cottage members throughout the course of my fieldwork, the specific nature of the practices that they were engaging in was downplayed in favour of the joy of their performance in the company of other people. This should not be taken as a sign that the participants do not have specific beliefs that guide and influence the practices they engage in; as I have already described, Violet Cottage is a complex patchwork of individual beliefs that, although overlapping in some areas, are entirely distinct in others. Instead, the reference to fun provides a clue as to how community can be created from a patchwork of divergent beliefs. Although it would be easy to dismiss the importance of ‘fun’ to what takes place in Violet Cottage, I argue that it is, in fact, the glue that binds this community together.

Play and the Suspension of Disbelief
As I have already noted, the individualism of the New Age has been a feature heavily remarked upon by social commentators. The fact that “only as few as 5 or 10 per cent of New Agers belong to and are faithful members of particular New Age organisations,” (Heelas, 1996:38, f.n.1) may be the result of the startling diversity of beliefs between individuals. Violet Cottage also partakes of this diversity, and yet maintains itself as a strong and stable community in an ever-changing and amorphous ‘cultic milieu’. In order to understand how ‘fun’ can support this, I turned to the notion of play, as described in performance theory.

‘Play’ is a concept that is difficult to define; it is not a specific action or a set of actions, it cannot be ‘found’ in a game, or a sentence, or a gesture. Play is something else, something that lies within the individuals who are playing: an attitude or mood, it is a way of approaching the world. Subjunctive and “grounded in the concept of possibility,” play

refers to what may or might be. It is also concerned with supposition, conjecture and assumption, with the domain of ‘as-if’ rather than ‘as-is.’ (Turner, 1988:169)

Play, as a category of behaviour, has long been associated with religion, and it has been a noted component of religious rituals across the world. The same is true within Western esoteric traditions: Luhrmann, in her classic 1989 work, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*, noted the importance of play for the practice of magic, saying that

the ideas and theories of magical practice are, for magicians, both assertions about the real world and 'let's pretend' fantasies… It is as if they were playing with belief – and yet they take themselves seriously, act on the results of their
divinations, and talk about the implications of their ideas. (Luhrmann, 1989:13)

Play in Violet Cottage is strongly associated with the suspension of disbelief. The nonchalance that the Violet Cottage members express towards the objective or religious truth of many of the New Age practices they engage in means that they are happy to participate as though they believe in the practice’s underlying logic, and yet retain a private scepticism. This playful attitude allows the participants to take part in collective practices without the specifics of their individual systems of belief getting in the way of the shared experience.

An attitude of play is fostered within Violet Cottage in two distinct ways. Firstly, Violet Cottage is created as a distinct ‘play-ground’ through the Cottage’s specific decoration and its exclusive use as a New Age locality. The strong and exotic smell of incense permeates the Cottage, lingering even when it's not presently being burnt. The bells and wind chimes strung from roof and window frame fill the air with brassy peals when a breeze blows. The eyes are drawn by paintings of spiritual beings and pentacles, and during the activities of the night the world is often reduced to the flickering circle of light thrown by candles.

The whimsical sensescape that is created each night with incense, candles, small bells and gentle music, means that when one steps into Violet Cottage, one gets the feeling of entering into a separate world where the normal rules of rationality and belief need not apply. This is reinforced by the Cottage’s decorations, which playfully combine highly diverse religious elements, such as statues of Mary and the archangel Michael alongside a wall-hanging depicting the Hindu elephant God Ganesh, a painting of a faerie, a mask of the Greenman, and a statue of a seated Buddha.

Violet Cottage is also created as a place outside of the normal flow of time through its exclusive use for New Age practices. As the locus for the community's spiritual activities -- rituals, classes, drumming, healing and psychic work -- Violet Cottage has developed a strong spiritual presence. This is arguably because, as Casey, notes,

Places gather things in their midst -- where ‘things’ connote various animate and inanimate entities. Places also gather experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts. [...] Gathering gives to place its peculiar perduringness, allowing us to return to it again and again as the same place and not just as the same position or site. (Casey, 1996:24)

Violet Cottage’s exclusive use as a New Age meeting place means that the energies that are generated by the women through the practice of spells, rituals, and psychic work are not dissipated through unassociated activity. The energies therefore build and tend to gather, acquiring presence and even form. This is routinely acknowledged by Violet Cottage members who often note the presence of spirits and ghosts.

The frequency with which spirit sightings are made within Violet Cottage attests to the strong spiritual presence that participants associate with it, a presence that has been created and maintained through sustained spiritual practice. This spiritual presence firmly positions Violet Cottage as partly of this world and partly of one
beyond, creating a strong distinction between everyday life and life-within-the-
Cottage that helps to maintain the suspension of disbelief.

This suspension of scepticism is reinforced through implicit rules governing speech
and behaviour that help to create Violet Cottage as a safe place in which one can
assert one’s spiritual truth without fear of censure. Open scepticism of any sort within
its walls is met with a gentle reprimand, reducing conflict between different beliefs
and helping to maintain an attitude of ‘anything could be true’. In the following
example, Rachel expresses her scepticism of Helen’s statement that she magically
made her phone break, immediately earning a coded reprimand from Sharon:

    Sharon: So is there any news before we begin the ritual?
    Helen: Yes, I hexed my phone and made it break.
    Sharon: Why would you do that?
    Helen: Well, it wasn't working and I sent the bloody thing to get repaired, but
they sent it back and said they couldn't make it do the problem that it was
having. They wouldn't replace it unless it broke completely, and I was left
with this phone that would only work some of the time. So I decided to hex it,
to make it break completely so that I could get a new one -- and it worked!
    Rachel: It might have just been a coincidence, you know. Maybe it was going
to break anyway.
    Sharon: You're not much of a witch, Rachel!

The social rules that are applied to maintain the suspension of disbelief in Violet
Cottage are highly reminiscent of what has been described as “women's language” by
Robin Lakoff (1976). “Women,” Lakoff writes, unlike men,
will tend to speak with reference to the rules of politeness, conversational
implicature, and interpersonal exploration. (Lakoff, 1976:74)

Whilst this does not hold true for all of the conversations within Violet Cottage, those
that involve a discussion of spirituality are highly regulated. The negotiation of
spiritual beliefs is accomplished through highly indirect language that means that the
“speaker can avoid committing himself [sic], and thereby avoid coming into conflict
with the addressee,” (Lakoff, 1976:16).

Sometimes, in the course of my fieldwork, I found myself the subject of this censure.
In the following example, Cheryl expresses scepticism towards the validity of the
“spiritual boom” that Renata describes, and when I provide evidence that seems to
support Cheryl's conclusion, I am challenged by Linden.

    Renata: From the 1830s to the 1930s there was this huge boom of spiritualism
in Britain and Europe. [...] During that period, during this great spiritual
boom, it was all about the visible, there was an emphasis on manifestation.
Now we've gotten past that, though, now it's all about feeling it. People still
channel spirits like they did then, but now it's very hidden and internal. […] It's all very experiential and internal. But wouldn't it have been brilliant to have lived back then? […]

Cheryl: But science has moved on so much since that time. So much now can be recorded, photographed, videographed. Maybe that's why it's so much more internal and experiential, in order to dodge this level of scrutiny.

Renata: [pauses for quite a long moment] It was very extensively written about during that period. There were so many newspaper articles and reports about the stuff that they were experiencing at that time.

Cheryl: But it all could have been faked back then. Houdini did an investigation of the production of ectoplasm and found that most of it was faked. Now [spiritualism] has retreated to a level that science can't touch. There is a similarity in the experiences that people report, but I have to wonder if they're actually similar or if it's because they've read of someone else's experience.

All: [absolutely dead silence for quite a long moment]

Cheryl: The time you were speaking of is a time of many small wars, where people were really questioning what was going on. And, you know, that happened again in the 1960s where people were questioning things and they had another spiritualism boom.

Steph: There was this article that I read recently that said that spirituality was really a critique of culture, a ‘shared doubt,’ and that seems to be kind of what you're saying, Cheryl.

Linden: That really doesn't ring true for me.

Linden did not challenge either Cheryl or I directly. She did not refer to our arguments, and in fact did not refer to us in any direct way at all. Linden's language was purely focused upon herself and her reaction to our proposition, something that we were fundamentally unable to challenge. However, although this confrontation occurred through indirect language, its intention was both clear and successful; after Linden said that it “did not ring true” to her all conversation on this topic ceased abruptly.

Unlike Lakoff’s (1976:76-83) original argument, women's language within Violet Cottage does not distance women from one another. The indirect language that is employed whilst discussing spirituality allows participants to converse without offending the spirituality that is a large part of their personal identity. These implicit social rules help to maintain the subjunctive mood that allows individuals to express and be acknowledged for their unique beliefs without provoking a conflict. This helps to maintain the playful attitude that members take towards the collective spiritual practices, in turn allowing them to participate regardless of the specifics of their individual systems of identity.
Playful Practice and Community

The shared collective practices made possible through the suspension of disbelief serve to form a sense of community and shared identity. This is in part due to the play experience itself. Play and ritual equally remove the participant from the mundane world and allow her to enter another governed by different rules, an experience that tends to sharply define the boundaries between the group and its Others.

A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over... the feeling of being ‘apart together’ in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game. (Huizinga, 1950:12)

Practice inculcates a specialised form of knowledge in the practitioners, knowledge that is unique to the community in which the particular practice takes place. This knowledge cannot be found in written, theoretical material; it is an embodied knowledge, a practical mastery or competence that incorporates such diverse areas as bodily comportment, appropriate interpretations, and forms of language. Communal practice, in short, instils a particular communal habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), what Shaun Best (2005:231) describes as “a set of dispositions that bring about a unity between the personal histories of people within a community.” This embodied knowledge distinguishes the community members from the rest of society, with the result that the practitioners essentially come to embody their communal identity.

This embodied community is evident in every part of the women's actions. Engaging in ritual allows the practical demonstration of a shared interest and competence in spiritual practices that differentiates the group from outsiders. One must know, for instance, that the food and drink passed around at the end of a ritual is not to be eaten until after a particular cue has been given, a mistake that I made early on. Competence can also be displayed in the language that is employed to discuss spirituality -- in the example that I recounted above I committed a faux pas when I provided evidence to support Cheryl's scepticism and was promptly called to order in the appropriate, indirect language of the community. Upon entering the Violet Cottage community one must learn not only how to broach such topics in an appropriate way, but also how to respond to inappropriate speech. The demonstration of these competencies and embodied knowledge helps to forge a common identity out of the disparate beliefs and biographies of the Violet Cottage women.

Furthermore, by participating in New Age practices -- despite their underlying scepticism – the Violet Cottage members open themselves up to the implicit logic of those practices, which is still being communicated although their participation is playful. By engaging in activities that are predicated upon a particular way of interpreting the world, the participants may end up absorbing that pattern of interpretation, a process that Luhrmann (1989) described as “interpretive drift.” Since the communication of these concepts is implicit rather than explicit, it may escape the attention of the participants, coming to form a part of their system of interpretation without conscious reflection. Practice, even though playful, may therefore eventually result in a relative consistency of belief throughout the Violet Cottage community, a consistency of belief that one would not find if one selected a random sample of the New Age population.
Conclusion

Conducting an ethnographic study based upon participant observation in the New Age group ‘Violet Cottage’ yielded substantial insight into both the formation of New Age community and my own approach to its study. In this article I have explored how shared practices, made possible through the playful suspension of disbelief, have allowed the Violet Cottage women to build a strong and vibrant spiritual community despite the diverse range of beliefs held by its individual members. This was an understanding, however, that was only gained after many months of frustration elicited by my initial approach to the New Age.

As I have previously mentioned, when I first began my fieldwork within Violet Cottage I found myself confused and overwhelmed by the eclecticism that was on display; fascinated with the diversity of belief, I found it difficult to understand how the Violet Cottage community could exist as a unified group. However, over the course of my fieldwork, I slowly came to realise - through my participation as much as my observation - that the practices of the women of Violet Cottage were just as important as their belief systems. For it was not until I looked beyond their beliefs, to what they were doing as well as what they were thinking, that I began to understand what tied the Violet Cottage women together.

Participation was an important part of my growing understanding of what made Violet Cottage tick. The nature of play means that it is difficult to perceive without being caught up within it. Outsiders can easily misinterpret play, or fail to see it at all. Participation in many of the Cottage’s activities allowed me to practically experience Violet Cottage more or less as the members do – to feel, hear, see, smell, and taste things as they do and to learn from this exposure. I do, of course, take it as a given that “we cannot live other people's lives and [that] it is a piece of bad faith to try,” (Geertz, 1986:373) but participation allowed me to use senses beyond mere hearing, sight, or touch, allowing me “to grasp, or convey meanings that reside neither in words, ‘facts’, nor texts, but are evoked in the meeting of one experiencing subject with the other,” (Wikan, 1992:463).

It was this intersubjective experience that allowed me to realise that the meaning the Violet Cottage women took from their participation went far beyond individual belief to the deep sense of community fostered by shared embodied knowledge. For spirituality, although it is sometimes approached as such, is not something that is simply thought about, nor is it merely a list of truth-claims that one subscribes to. Instead, spirituality is something that is embodied, a part of one’s bodily as well as cognitive habitus. Community within Violet Cottage cannot be thought about without acknowledging and engaging with these embodied dimensions of spirituality, an area of analysis that is often absent from discussions of the New Age and its individualistic nature.

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