

Researching the roots of Vampirism: Inheritance versus adaptation

Introduction

As cultural icons, vampires are perhaps second only to zombies in terms of the significance they hold. From the *Twilight* series and the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series to the books of Anne Rice, the characteristics and meanings placed upon vampires and vampirism vary widely. Indeed, unlike zombies, vampires are ascribed so many positive characteristics that it is unsurprising that many people would want to emulate them, even to be vampires. What of these “real” vampires in our world? Is vampirism an innate condition or a matter of cultural conversion? In their research, Keyworth (2002) and Laycock (2010) take opposing sides in this debate. Both are concerned with groups of people who exhibit conventional characteristics and tendencies similar to vampires present in folklore. A “real vampire” is defined as an individual who feels the need to consume blood or drain the “subtle” energies of other people in order to sustain their physical, mental, or spiritual health. These real vampires have formed communities, mainly within the borders of the United States. These communities are often very hard to come by and very secretive, but social organizations and events produced by real vampire groups occur on a regular basis.

Keyworth (2002) and Laycock (2010) are two researchers pursuing the same questions in very different ways: How do real vampires define themselves? What is their lifestyle like? Is vampirism a choice or genetics? In “The socio-religious beliefs and nature of the contemporary vampire subculture,” Keyworth makes the claim that real vampirism is defined by society’s contemporary culture procured through many social and environmental influences; therefore, being a real vampire is not an innate quality,

but an identity one adapts to. He supports this claim with wide-ranging textual research, including archival online research into vampire fan culture, court cases, and medical literature. Laycock opposes this notion in “Real vampires as an identity group,” arguing that real vampirism is an inherent identity/condition that is independent of other influences such as cultural and external factors. Laycock uses observational research methods, mainly an ethnographic study of a vampire organization in Atlanta, to support his case. I will argue that this contrast in methods explains the opposing arguments the authors make: the ethnographer is more likely to sympathize with his informants than the textual researcher sitting at his desk is likely to place much stock in overzealous Anne Rice fans’ claims to have actual vampire qualities. That said, the synthesis of both methods and perspectives provides a more complete picture of the cultural phenomenon of real vampirism, because the textual methods, while they are less intensively focused on the ways of life of real vampires, provide the broader picture that accounts for the propagation of concepts of vampirism throughout society.

Keyworth (2002). “The socio-religious beliefs and nature of the contemporary vampire subculture”

Methods of Research

In his study of vampirism, Keyworth uses of textual research in which he incorporates numerous sources and schools of thought. To conduct his research and form conclusions, he reveals some bias in his selectivity of texts by choosing sources that focus on both the fictional aspects of vampires and the fallacy that actual vampirism is becoming a reality. That said, his article encompasses a wide range of primary and secondary sources derived from historical materials, mass media, contemporary

religious institutions' papers, survey and demographic statistics, vampire websites, medical documents, court cases, and the research of other scholars.

Keyworth begins with the inclusion of several primary sources relating to the synthesis of gothic and vampire culture. He takes note of both the Gothic movement from the 1970s and a fictional books and film that, he believes, largely forms the basis for the modern vampire subculture: Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976; film released in 1994). He then includes empirical works such as a 1986 vampire related survey conducted by Norine Dresser (1989, cited in Keyworth, 2002). Dresser discovered that, "72% of her respondents (and 100% of 16–19 year olds) believed that the fictional Anne Rice-type vampires actually existed in reality" (Keyworth, 2002, p. 357). Keyworth then refers to another primary source, the *Traits of Real Vampires* website (a website invented by the vampire community), which is essentially a blueprint that defines the characteristics of such "empowered" beings. Keyworth pointedly notes that the DSM-IV (the manual of psychological disorders) contains no entry for vampirism, a clear dismissal of the "reality" of the website. He does note that Richard Noll, author of *Vampires, Werewolves & Demons: Twentieth Century Reports in the Psychiatric Literature* (1992), discusses Renfield's Syndrome (a very rare psychiatric condition which entails the intense compulsion to drink blood). With this secondary source, Keyworth juxtaposes real vampirism, as described in the *Traits* website, and the clinical condition known as Renfield's Syndrome. He further includes studies derived from Stephen Kaplan, a researcher in the Vampire Research Center who also casts doubt on the contemporary vampire community. Additionally, Keyworth touches upon a positive correlation that suggests, "Individuals claiming to be 'real' vampires often had a

disturbed upbringing which includes abuse, neglect, alienation, and abandonment. Also, a definite link exists between the supposed need for blood and the desire for a loving relationship” (Keyworth, 2002, p. 360). These data and analysis originated in research into autobiographies and court cases. Preceding his conclusion, Keyworth compares the similarities between past religious groups, which comprise of dogmas that possibly allude to vampirism, and the many socio-religious vampire groups that are present today.

The primary analytical technique Keyworth employs is a synthetic interpretation of the primary and secondary texts. For example, his research into historical texts functions to show the sources from which real vampires gain their inspiration for their identity. Keyworth discerns that contemporary vampire groups, intentionally or subconsciously, associate themselves with the modern popular vampires portrayed in fictional films and widespread media. Indeed the popularity of the those sources is a testament to their influence. He comments that, “The vampire existence depicted by Anne Rice in her novels mirrored the life and thoughts of many Generation X’ers and as a consequence, many were encouraged to emulate the vampire lifestyle, adopt a vampire persona, and pursue a spirituality that focused on the vampire” (Keyworth, 2002, p. 356). Moving forward to Dresser’s statistics, Keyworth asserts that the gullibility that resides in the youth concerning vampires can be attributed to the influence of vampire related media and film. And this absurdly high degree of belief in vampires likely contributes the steady rise of vampire subculture. Next, by comparing the official *Traits of Real Vampires* website to the scholarly works and opinions of Noll and Kaplan, Keyworth demonstrates the lack of resemblance of the contemporary vampire

community in comparison to the vampires portrayed in folklore or those diagnosed with Renfield's Syndrome. Because real vampires lack the essential traits of vampires of lore as well as fail to exhibit the regular symptoms of one diagnosed with Renfield's Syndrome, Keyworth assumes that a vast majority of real vampires are pretenders or role players who don't require blood for actual sustenance; acts of bloodletting tend to be perceived as an erotic factor more than anything. Based on the correlation data, Keyworth suggests that a disturbed upbringing is a powerful factor in joining the vampire community and commencing in grotesque acts. This further backs up the claim that real vampirism is not a genetic predisposition, but more likely a means to cope from childhood trauma. His mentioning of past religious groups illustrates the influence they had on contemporary vampire religious groups and their newfound beliefs. Consider Christian inspired vampire sects that believe in "The notion that drinking blood extends life is reminiscent of the Resurrection and the commandment that to drink the blood of Christ is to gain eternal life" (Keyworth, 2002, p. 365). The fact that these vampire religious groups have only been recently instituted in concurrence with the combination of society's cultural references and religious influences shows that real vampirism is a side effect of the culture, not biology. With critical evaluation, Keyworth substantiates this claim from evidence gathered through the textual sources' information and data.

Keyworth's argument greatly resembles a vast causal explanation in that his article includes many, varied sources that are all plausible disjoint causes of vampirism in an individual. He ultimate causes reside in the primary sources, and the support for the causal model resides in a few secondary, interpretative sources. The primary sources, namely the statistics themselves (but not their interpretation by the researchers

who collected them), autobiographies (mostly on websites), popular fiction, and reports of specific events, are first used in the literature review to provide the reader some basis of knowledge on vampirism. Keyworth then drives forward his ideas, theories, and conclusions that he believes cause vampirism. To persuade the audience even further, he integrates the secondary sources (the scholarly opinions) to corroborate his previous stated ideas. By laying out his argument in such a way, Keyworth is intelligently backing up his claims of causation through the immense amount of derived sources. On another note, Keyworth's presentation of his results are somewhat convoluted, as there seems to be a lack of organization among the types of data and the listing of interpretive claims (which are not, for example, listed neatly in the abstract). This creates mild confusion for the reader. The effect is that one can read the article as a very well informed rant about the illegitimacy of vampirism as a real religion or biological condition.

“Real vampires as an identity group: Analyzing causes and effects of an introspective survey by the vampire community”

Methods of Research

In this article, Laycock relies on empirical research through observational and (to a much lesser extent) quantitative means. His methods of observation include an ethnographic study of participants in the AVA (Atlanta Vampire Alliance), references to the organization's lengthy survey reaching out to vampires globally, and a few interviews to find out this subculture's perspective in its own words. By relying on such real-world experiences to shape his reasoning, Laycock certainly gains a level of authority, but it is noticeable that he neglects to evaluate textual references, which in

this particular case seem obviously relevant to the social phenomenon (it's not as though *Dracula* was a historical document).

With an open mind, Laycock made an appearance at the AVA (an organization made by and for real vampires) to conduct an ethnographic study. He observed the organization's basic structure, took note of the members' peculiarities/ activities, and assessed their fundamental lifestyles. He then proceeded to interview vampires associated with AVA to acquire a fuller understanding of how this group perceives themselves. Additionally, Laycock actively participated in an "energy workshop," that is, a process used to experience the subtle energies that psychic vampires feed on for sustenance. This gave him the realization that "during these exercises I did indeed feel tactile sensations in my palms and fingertips. While I did not attempt to rationalize or assign meaning to these sensations, by allowing myself to feel them I was able to achieve a more sympathetic understanding of the vampire life-world" (Laycock, 2010, p. 10). During this observational period, Laycock also witnessed the AVA's distribution and collection of a global survey titled, "The vampire and energy work research survey: An introspective examination of the real vampire community," which was produced in aims to reach out to as many real vampires as possible (p. 9). The survey, heavily based on Floyd J. Fowler's work, was designed as a double-blind submission process in which neither the subjects nor the experimenters knew the applications or critical aspects of the study. Based on the survey's findings, researchers could analyze and compare the qualitative and quantitative properties of the data; this is known as the concurrent triangulation strategy. Results showed that, "74 percent of vampires have no affiliation with any sort of group or institution, even on the local level" (p. 13). The

survey results also allowed Laycock to determine operational definitions for the purpose of differentiating the types of vampires worldwide.

During and following his time with the Atlanta Vampire Alliance, Laycock analyzes the information he discovered from a framework of studying religious organizations, referring to “identity” and “institutional” models and drawing on theorists like Foucault and Hacking (2010, pp.10-12). He determines that vampire groups were primarily acephalous in structure and multifaceted in convention; therefore, the assumption that these associations are a unified religious group or a strict cultural entity is false for they lack the necessary properties to be classified as either. Nevertheless, there are aspects of culture present in the AVA and among vampires. For example, his meticulous inspection of the AVA organization enlightens Laycock about the misconceptions that real vampires are subject to in society. Contrary to the stereotypical vampires portrayed in media, films, and literature, Laycock argues that many vampires deviate from the typical gothic wardrobe and that most of their feeding habits stray from popular beliefs. In regards to the AVA, Laycock notes that, “the group did not seem concerned with fashion or appearance. (No one seemed to notice when someone arrived in an oversized florescent yellow t-shirt)” (Laycock, 2010, p. 9). This suggests that some cultural influences, such as appearance, do not play a role in the shaping of vampirism, but that other more foundational beliefs unify the vampire community. Interviewees’ responses support Laycock’s stance on how vampirism is wrongfully misjudged in modern society as either delusional behavior or a clinical health condition, rather than an immutable state of existence. He recorded one AVA vampire admitting that, “He would prefer to be like everyone else if it were possible” (p. 7), thus showing

that vampirism is not a matter of choice or simply adapted behavior. Not only that, but the experience that the “energy workshop” provided Laycock a better understanding for why this particular way of feeding is so alluring, addictive, and nourishing to vampires. By living vicariously through a real vampire’s shoes, Laycock finds sense in a world in which outsiders cannot fathom. Moreover, Laycock’s inclusion of the AVA survey data also provides meaningful evidence. The fact that 74 percent of the subjects were not associated with any religious group or institution reinforces his claim that religion is not a defining aspect of a real vampire’s identity. Laycock reasserts that this identity is inherent and independent from cultural or religious ascription. The survey also establishes a basis for operational definitions of vampire terminology. For example, Laycock observes that “lifestyle vampires” (a form of role-players) are people who merely participate in vampire subculture and have the option to opt out, while “real vampires” are instilled with the unquenchable thirst to feed regardless of participation in vampire organizations. This discrimination between lifestyles is often disregarded in outsider research. Consequently, what persists is an underlying confusion; a general error of thinking that presumes “lifestyle vampires,” those who form an identity based on cultural aspects, and “real vampires,” those born with vampirism, are one of the same. Laycock clarifies that these lifestyle vampires, who are considered by real vampires as “flakier than a croissant factory” (Laycock, 2010, p. 12) are not representative of the entire vampire community, and as so, should not be judged like such.

Even though the second part of Laycock’s paper title is “Analyzing causes and effects of an introspective survey by the vampire community,” there seems to be a lack of actual causation. Pertaining to the question at hand, the only cause that Laycock

asserts is that biology brings about the vampirism effect, but this is supported with the survey and other forms of observation and nothing remotely resembling genetic testing, say. He largely capitalizes on these important observational aspects to refute misconceptions on the origin of vampire subculture. In his article, Laycock continuously rotates from one method of observation to another in order to address and alleviate potential concerns or doubts of real vampirism. He does this by either presenting his recorded observations from the ethnographic study or providing statistics derived from the AVA's global survey. He then delivers ideas and formulates analysis based on the newfound evidence. These theories are then followed up with reinforcing remarks and comments from vampires who were questioned in interviews. Laycock values actual interpersonal experience as opposed to an abundance of textual references, for he chooses to either dispute or not consider such sources. Through means of his empirical evidence, Laycock attempts to convey to his audience the reality of vampirism at a personal level of identity and not just as an amorphous group. In a way, this subjective approach has similar characteristics to narrative explanation, though incomplete. The interviews, especially, succeed at providing emotional cadence and empathy for the vampire community: the initially skeptical but intrigued audience moves toward feeling a resolved sympathy toward the characters Laycock portrays. Thus, the statements given by them are likely a means to win over the audience and convince them of the vampires' veracity. In terms of layout, Laycock's text displays results in a more organized manner in juxtaposition to Keyworth's piece. The paragraphs are concise, and the appearance of headings such as "Among the vampires," "Survey methodology," and "Identity and discourse" very much aids in the paper's dividing of methods and

analysis. Because of such organization, the premise and results of Laycock's article are easily identifiable and present to the reader.

Modes of Analysis: A Juxtaposition of Articles

Although the research methods executed by Keyworth and Laycock are fundamentally different, and their final conclusions are direct antitheses, there are many commonalities between their papers that can be perceived. Both Keyworth and Laycock demonstrate the use of abduction, inference based on real observations and previous held concepts or beliefs.

In "The socio-religious beliefs and nature of the contemporary vampire subculture," Keyworth (2002) asserts that real vampirism is not an actual condition that causes a person to take on vampire characteristics; rather, "vampirism" is an assumed identity reinforced by pop culture, and it is taken up by gullible or mentally unstable individuals. This previous statement of abduction was only achievable through the assimilation of known facts and concepts. Keyworth considers the fact that vampires have long been established as folklore and mythological creatures, rather than true entities. He clearly assumes that people are easily influenced and at times gullible, even at the level of personal identity and group membership. Moreover, there is an implicit assumption that the time order of fictional sources coming before the rise of the vampire culture indicates that such a culture can only be derivative (as opposed to, for example, a common cause leading to both the culture and the books and movies). Keyworth backs up his abductive reasoning with convincing evidence. He sources Anne Rice's widely popular vampire book, *Interview with the Vampire*, as a kind of origin story for modern Goth/vampire culture. Using other primary and secondary sources,

Keyworth shows that indeed Rice's novel serves as a template for vampire identity, replicated by the vampire community itself. This, Keyworth ultimately argues, shows that the individually proclaimed vampires indulge in an unreal fantasy; and living in a fantasy existence can only be explained through the gullible or disturbed nature of a person's character.

Similarly, it is evident that Laycock's piece, "Real Vampires as an Identity Group," also contains abduction. However, contrary to the citing of sources online, Laycock takes an observational approach and ascertains primary evidence through empirical means. In turn, this type of research methodology fosters a perspective that drastically differs from Keyworth's perception of the vampire community. To push forward with his observational study, Laycock makes the abductive claim that the vampire subculture was founded on more than solely media influence and pop culture references. He arrives at this inference based on facts and assumptions. An undeniable fact is that many identity groups associate themselves by common natural traits and innate predispositions. This fact could possibly apply to the vampire identity group. In terms of assumptions, there is a general rule that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, in that it's unfair to define a group or individual without understanding their perspective or dispositions. This is not as clichéd as it might seem: Laycock quotes the famous cultural theorist Michel Foucault's notion of the "constitution of subjects" as a basis for arguing that people's identities are always products of their environment and the way the society at large categorizes them. To support his abduction, Laycock conducts interviews at the Atlanta Vampire Alliance association in Georgia. By observing that these real vampires apparently had no choice in the matter and many

even had distaste for their immutable life sentence, Laycock shows that these groups were not organized through shallow means. Additionally, the information received through interrogative methods allows Laycock to get a second perspective on the situation, a perspective that Keyworth failed to take into consideration. By recognizing the vampires' perspectives, Laycock comprehends the misunderstandings real vampires face and discerns that, like many identity groups, vampire communities were developed on a greater basis than Anne Rice books. Like Keyworth, Laycock utilizes the process of abduction and then affirms his claims with particular research methods.

Despite the similar use of abduction, it is apparent that both Keyworth and Laycock's respective articles differ in research methods and conclusions. A potential factor to this deviation of method and thought is possibly determined by the inclusion or exclusion of the hypothetico-deductive model. This model entails that a hypothesis should be able to be falsified or supported based on experiments or observable data. Hypothetico-deduction demands empirical findings in order to increase or decrease the solidity of a hypothesis. The fact that Keyworth uses textual research methods exposes his omission of hypothetico-deduction. His basis of knowledge is solely accessed through the internet or local library. Therefore, he has to rely on the statistics and data of other empirical sources that were carried out in the past. On the other hand, Laycock utilizes an observational approach for his research methods in order to strengthen his premise. So as an observer, he seemingly integrates the hypothetico-deductive model in his study. It's not the case that he went into the study intending to confirm or disconfirm any particular hypothesis; rather, he allows his interactions with the group to synthesize with his prior assumptions as a scholar of religion to form new "guesses"

about how and why vampires become vampires. His ethnographic observations, numerous interviews, and statistical survey findings all contribute factual support for this hypothetico-deduction. Having said that, this does not imply that Keyworth's position or results on the matter were any less admissible or less convincing. In fact, both articles provide significant analysis and compelling evidence to the question at hand despite the difference of methods, opinions, and resultant conclusions. On the one hand, it seems obvious that vampire culture, whatever it is, must take at least some of its defining characteristics from fictional sources. On the other, that doesn't mean it cannot evolve into a cultural affiliation with its own unique, non-derivative qualities that are important, even vital, to its members' identity formation.

References

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