

SYMBOLIC HEALING AND HARMING

Wed. Sept. 22, 2004

Read:

Brown: Shamanism and its discontents
Ong: The production of possession: spirits and the multinational corporation in Malaysia
Good et al.: American oncology and the discourse on hope
Miner Body ritual among the Nacirema

- I. Lourdes in southwestern France offers an example of religious, symbolic healing
 - A. Divine intervention—St. Bernadette had a vision of the Virgin Mary
 1. The pilgrimage has been going on since 1858
 2. The initial vision said nothing about the spring's healing powers
 - B. Today
 1. Lourdes receives over 2 million visitors annually, including over 30,000 sick
 2. As happens with other forms of religious healing, cures validate it, but failures cannot disprove it
 3. Pilgrims are the chronically ill who, usually, fail to respond to medical remedies
 - a. Despair, their lives severely disrupted
 - b. The decision to travel changes their lives: their families are energized, money is raised, perhaps by a congregation, the preparation and journey are a dramatic break in routine
 - c. Except for the initial cures in the 19th century, Lourdes has failed to cure those living in its vicinity
 - d. Upon arrival, pilgrims are plunged into a “city of pilgrims”
 - 1) Previous cures are all that is talked about, there is evidence everywhere—discarded crutches, etc.; the ritual begins with a validation of the shrine's power

- 2) Days are filled with trips to the grotto and religious services
 - 3) Group processions can be as large as 40 or 50 thousand, praying for others
 - a) The majority of sick do not experience a cure, but many say they feel better, clearly there are psychological benefits from the experience
 - b) One gains merit by making the trip: “The trip to Lourdes is never made in vain”
 - c) Those who help who are not sick gain merit
- C. “Miraculous” healings at Lourdes in the Church’s view are few: less than 100—they require stringent documentation
1. But there are well-documented cures
 2. Note that inexplicable cures of serious organic disease occur in everyday medical practice. Any physician can provide examples
 3. At Lourdes, healing takes place as it does elsewhere
 - a. No one regrows an amputated limb
 - b. The paralyzed may get up and walk, but weight gain takes place over weeks, any restored skin is scar tissue, etc.
- D. A great deal of literature disputes these cures
1. Because it is assumed that to accept them means one has to believe what Catholic theology says is happening.
- E. But Lourdes shows parallels with religious healing elsewhere:
1. Such healing involves a coming together of the patient, his/her family, the larger group, and the supernatural world by means of a dramatic, emotionally charged, aesthetically rich ritual that expresses and reinforces a shared ideology
 2. Compare to Brown’s discussion of Aguaruna shamanic healing

- II. Methods of supernatural healing highlight:
- A. The close interplay of bodily systems and emotional states
 - B. The intimate relation of both to health and illness
 - C. The parallel between inner disorganization and disturbed relations with one's group (or a disturbed cosmos, etc.)
 - D. They indicate how a patterned interaction of patient, healer, and group within the framework of a local set of assumptions can promote healing
 - 1. All the articles for today provide illustrations of symbolic harm and healing
 - a. Good et al.: no supernatural involved
 - b. Brown, Ong and Miner, yes, the supernatural is involved
 - E. These assumptions continue in modern society, although transformed
 - 1. Although if you assume a very outsider position, as Miner does, you will conclude that the Nacirema reveal very strong underlying beliefs about symbolic harm and healing, much of it supernaturally caused, or at least influenced
 - 2. Good et al.'s discussion of books by Bernie Siegel and the Simontons about somehow symbolically healing yourself (which, as Siegel points out, may not be *curing* yourself)
 - a. Are disputed by oncologists, yet they subscribe to a version of symbolic healing as well
 - b. What's the difference?
 - F. These healing systems often co-exist with naturalistic treatment: herbs, manipulations, surgical operations
 - 1. And co-exist with the local version of biomedicine
- III. Characteristics of etiology, diagnosis, treatment in systems that stress symbolic healing and harming:

- A. These belief systems tend to assume that illness is a misfortune involving the entire person
1. The consequences have to do with the sick person's relationships with the spirit world and other members of the group
 2. Illness classifications often bear no resemblance to those of Western medicine
 - a. In particular, these systems don't distinguish sharply between mental and bodily illness, or between that due to natural and that due to supernatural causes
 - 1) Both natural and supernatural causes can contribute
- B. Anthropologists often interpret such sicknesses as symbolic expressions of internal conflicts or disturbed relationships to others (or both)
1. Soul loss, possession by an evil spirit, magical insertion of a harmful body by a sorcerer, machinations of offended or malicious ancestral ghosts
 2. Often it's assumed that the patient laid her/himself open to these calamities through some witting or unwitting transgression against the supernatural world
 - a. Examples from Ong?
 3. Or through incurring the enmity of a sorcerer or other enemy who employed a sorcerer
 4. Maybe the transgressor wasn't even the sufferer, but a relative
- C. How such illnesses are healed reveals underlying assumptions
1. Oftentimes there is an attempt to correct the disturbance, the dis-order
 - a. Discuss: examples in the West?
 2. The corrections, the restoration of order are carried out by shamans
 - a. An intermediary between humans and the supernatural
 - b. Usually a group is involved in the treatment session, not just the curer and the patient

- c. The shaman in the Ong article performs public rituals:
 - 1) His curing is restoring order: he makes a place “safe” again
 - 2) Discuss: any parallels with our society?
- d. Individuals are certainly treated as well as society, but notice that responsibility falls, to some degree, on the individual
 - 1) The Ong piece: those who unknowingly urinate on an inhabited site and fall sick are not as “resistant” as others
 - 2) Or didn’t eat any breakfast

D. The group healing ritual

- 1. Might be led by a religious practitioner, but what brings about healing is different—the group itself is seen to do it
- 2. May involve ancestral or other spirits
- 3. We can find such rituals in many US churches:
 - a. Charismatic Catholics, for example
 - b. Discuss: other examples?
- 4. Ritual (public ritual) can be seen as involving members of a culture sending messages to one another about their lives, the meaning of life, what’s important, etc.
- 5. And rituals *accomplish* things

IV. Symbolic Harming: further discussion

- A. I mentioned last time Walter Cannon’s famous article on “Voodoo Death”¹
 - 1. An M.D., he explores questions about the efficacy of symbolic harming
 - a. Among some Australian Aborigine cultures, if a very powerful curse is directed at someone, h/she may eventually die

¹ Walter Cannon, 1942. “‘Voodoo’ Death.” *American Anthropologist* 44: 169-181.

2. Belief leads to emotional experience leads to effects on the body
 - a. With society playing a role
 - b. The final cause (belief in the power of the curse) is “irrational” but more proximate causes are physiological ones—no mystery about why death occurs
 3. Symbolic harm at the level of society
 - a. Society is organized to communicate to everyone who is a member and who is not; who is alive and who is *de facto* dead
 - b. A form of shunning occurs—behaving as though the cursed individual is already dead
 - 1) It communicates that s/he is already socially dead
 - 2) Discuss: effects?
 - 3) Discuss: how would we explain this process of dying using biomedicine?
- B. Another famous article by Evans-Pritchard explaining Azande witchcraft, sorcery beliefs: “Witchcraft explains unfortunate events”
1. Last time I presented 4 kinds of explanations that have been offered to account for “irrational” beliefs
 - a. Evans-Pritchard’s article is a good example of an attempt to find “rationality” in what appear to be irrational beliefs
 - 1) The system is logical except for its faulty premises
 - b. Examples of unfortunate events:
 - 1) Azande granaries are elevated
 - 2) People sit under them in the shade
 - 3) Granaries have a habit of collapsing
 - 4) Sometimes they collapse on people, killing them

- c. Azande understand this cause-and-effect chain perfectly well
 - 1) But why did this happen to my mother, why did it collapse just when she's sitting under it?

2. Evans-Pritchard argues that there are both psychological and social *functions* such beliefs accomplish

- a. On the individual level: such beliefs reassure people there are reasons for unfortunate events
- b. What reassurance of this nature do we provide in the West?
- c. Hypothesized functions at the societal level proposed in the literature:
 - 1) One kind of function is that of a leveling mechanism: if a man finds three honey-combs in one day, he is accused of witchcraft
 - 2) Such potential accusations, it is argued, militate against a person's overly strong striving for success—a "leveling" function
 - 3) Another function might be that conflict is directed to outside the extended family via beliefs that a non-kin enemy is practicing witchcraft
 - 4) This explanation won't work for certain other societies, where who is bewitching you could be your in-laws, or even your close blood kin
 - 5) Another: accusations absorb latent hostilities (seen to be good for individual, good for society)
 - 6) The beliefs explain the world

V. Discuss: everyone think of an example

- A. Symbolic healing
- B. Symbolic harming