

**“Irrational” Beliefs in Disease Causation and Treatment I**

- I. Symbolic healing (and harming)
  - A. Fadiman notes: “I was suspended in a large bowl of Fish Soup. Medicine was religion. Religion was society. Society was medicine.” (p. 60)
    - 1. **DISCUSS:** contrast with Western medicine
    - 2. Other readings will provide similar examples from other societies: the Wikan article about Bali is one
  - B. We need to talk about *symbolic healing* in order to understand how medicine might be religion, religion might be society and society might be medicine
    - 1. **DISCUSS:** examples of symbolic healing and harming?
  - C. Biomedicine’s premises hold that symbolic healing and harming cannot occur
    - 1. That what appears to be symbolic healing/harming is in fact healing/harming through another mechanism
      - a. Or the conclusion is drawn that in fact a physical, organic pathology is absent—the cause is psychiatric pathology of some sort

2. Remember, when we speak of biomedicine's premises, we are discussing a **philosophical system**: a set of assertions based on underlying premises

a. Not necessarily what actually happens in medical practice

1) Not necessarily what individual physicians and nurses think and do

b. Not necessarily what *we* in this room believe actually happens in a given illness episode and treatment

1) Probably none of us accept biomedicine's premises 100%

c. And there's a huge amount of research using methodologies acceptable to biomedicine

1) That shows that the *final cause* of an organic pathology is, in fact, symbolic

3. **DISCUSS**: examples you have heard of?

4. Symbolic healing/harming cannot be biomedical healing/harming because it occurs through **symbols**, and by definition symbols are not physical, material
  - a. Symbols have meaning only by being interpreted
  - b. They have no existence “out there”
    - 1) If a symbol is divorced from a given culture and language, it loses its meaning and disappears
    - 2) Note that not all symbols are verbal
      - a) **DISCUSS**: examples of non-verbal symbols?
    - 3) But all symbols, by definition, are meaningful
  - c. Biomedicine holds that biological, chemical and physical processes do not depend on cultural interpretation to make them agentive—able to cause harming or healing
4. Examples in our own culture of statements based on beliefs about symbolic healing/harming:
  - a. “Step on a crack, break your mother’s back”

b. “He’s a pain in the neck”

c. God sent the illness

5. Such explanations of causes of harm find no comfortable place within biomedicine, because they do, at some stage, depend on symbols

a. We can medicalize these explanations a bit

1) We can say that stress from interacting with that horrible person produces my pain in the neck

2) Here stress is **medicalized**

3) But we still can’t biomedically account for how hearing and observing another person, entirely through symbols, produces the physical symptoms

a) Biomedicine cannot account for “psychosomatic” disease, even though *medicine* diagnoses it and treats it all the time

4) Clinical medicine in general concerns itself with the *proximate* causes of illness or wellness, and not with more *distal* ones

b. God sending an illness, or death, is not an acceptable explanation within biomedicine

1) Although many people, including physicians, believe that God does act in the world

c. “Step on a crack” makes us giggle

1) The implied etiology is a form of magic, and biomedicine doesn’t accept magic

2) “Etiology” means cause of a disorder

D. No other healing/harming philosophical system postulates a human body that is so mechanical, so biological, so bounded, and so secular. Remember Kleinman’s point:

“For...non-Westerners the body is an open system linking social relations to the self, a vital balance between interrelated elements in a holistic cosmos. Emotion and cognition are integrated into bodily processes. The body-self is not a secularized private domain of the individual person but an organic part of a sacred, sociocentric world; a communication system involving exchanges with others (including the divine)”<sup>1</sup>

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1 Kleinman 1988 *Illness Narratives*: 11.

- E. We use the labels like “superstition,” “religion,” “magic,” etc., to characterize other philosophical systems that explain the causes of unwanted conditions and provide ways to restore health

### III. Religious and Symbolic Etiology and Healing

- A. **DISCUSS:** what is religion?

- B. Anthropological characterization:

- 1. First: it explains the world: how it works, how it began, what it means

- a. It confronts and explains death

- 2. Second: it provides a code for moral behavior

- 3. Third: it provides a framework for **feelings, experiences** we consider spiritual or religious

- a. Transcendence, ecstasy

- b. Attaining spiritual self-hood

C. These general characteristics of religion have hypothesized *functions* embedded in them (I'm giving the outsider, anthropological view, not an insider's view)

1. What are these hypotheses? The most frequently cited ones are psychological:

a. That humans *need* an explanation of the world, and hence religious beliefs appeared

b. That we *need* a code for conduct, and sanctions

1) That such a code functions to keep people on the straight and narrow because they are afraid of the consequences if they don't

c. That we have psychophysiological *needs* to feel and express certain emotions, and religion functions in this manner

2. Other functions that scholars have hypothesized:

a. That religion reduces anxiety by explaining the unknown

1) Is reassuring: supernatural aid will be available in times of crisis

- b. That by providing notions of right and wrong, religion helps to regulate, organize, and structure relationships and expectations
  - 1) Also to regulate change: for example, the seasons, the stages of an individual's life
    - 2) And to prevent or enhance some changes: rainmakers, prayers for good harvests, prayers to stop plagues
    - 3) Both psychological and social functions are contained in these hypotheses
- c. That religion serves to justify certain actions, like punishing children or wrongdoers
  - 1) Religion can take the burden of decision-making from individuals to supernatural powers
- d. That religion builds social solidarity in a number of ways
- e. That religion reinforces the status quo—the current system
  - 1) One school of thought says that a given religion is a mirror of that society

a) Supernatural beings do have an uncanny way of resembling (sometimes by being the opposite) our assumptions about what people are like

(1) They have familiar human lusts, jealousies

(a) Think of Greek myths

(b) God is often spoken of as having human-like emotions

(c) “For I thy God

2) Exceptions to this function of reinforcing the status quo:

a) New religions, millenarian religions always challenge the status quo

D. What does religion consist of in terms of behavior, events?

1. Rituals—prayers, songs, dances, offerings, sacrifices

a. People try to manipulate supernatural beings and powers

b. These can be gods or goddesses, ancestral ghosts and other spirits, or impersonal powers

1) **DISCUSS:** examples in Fadiman?

2. Religious specialists

a. Priests, priestesses, shamans

1) Priests are full-time specialists

a) You need a complex enough society for this role

b) Someone else has to work to provide the priest and priestesses with food, etc.

2) Shamans are often found in small-scale societies

a) Shamans are seen to have special religious power, acquired through their own initiative, and special abilities to deal with supernatural beings and powers

b) In particular: divination, healing, reestablishing balance of the cosmos to prevent illness from happening

(1) Priests do this, too

c) Another way to contrast the two is to say that the *clients* of shamans are *humans* who enlist their help; the clients of priests and priestesses are *deities*

3. Lore, especially sacred lore, in the form of oral tradition (myths which are recounted) or texts

E. What's the difference between religion and magic? Here is one scheme:

1. Magic does not depend on mediation by supernatural beings

a. I shoot 3 arrows into 3 rocks and say my incantation, and a man breaks out in boils

2. Contagious magic and sympathetic magic

a. "Step on a crack, break your mother's back, step on a line, break your mother's spine"

- 1) Is an example of sympathetic magic
  - b. Magic that uses nail clippings, hair (“voodoo dolls”) is contagious
3. Relics that accomplish miracles (bones, pieces of wood) can have elements of both sympathetic and contagious magic—if they themselves accomplish the healing, rather than a deity
4. **DISCUSS:** How do you feel about clothing, etc., that once belonged to someone?
  - a. If it has blood on it?
  - b. Only that it’s dirty?
  - c. Or is there a sense of “contagion” there as well?
  - d. If there is anything more to the feeling in addition to the sense of dirt
    - 1) Then we have an example of “irrational” beliefs

5. But dislike and fear of dirt is rational, correct?

6. In fact, dirt is not a thing; it's a symbol

a. Hair on butter, butter on hair

1) Neither is dirty in itself; they become dirty when they become matter out of place

b. Dirt itself isn't dirty until it gets onto someone's clothes or skin—is out of place

1) First page of Fadiman: "The floor was dirt, but it was clean."

c. Think about spitting into a glass of water and then drinking it

IV. Many people in the West don't accept biomedicine's radically disenchanted view of the world and our bodies' place in it

A. **DISCUSS:** examples?

1. Alternative, complementary medicine is an example—those parts that are based on faith

2. How many use astrology, or channeling for health concerns?

a. Huge numbers, in fact<sup>2</sup>

V. Biomedical science's attempts to explain religion

A. An issue of *Newsweek* on science and spirituality showed how PET scanning reveals different areas of the brain becoming hyper or dormant when religious adepts achieve an altered state of consciousness

1. Scientists measured the brain function of nuns and the Dalai Lama when they were experiencing cosmic oneness, or the dissolution of the body and self into the divine

2. A perfect illustration of biomedicine's radically physical and secular premises

a. Those experiences are not produced by the divinity, the nun is not one with the universe, it's glucose levels

3. This article (and the research) is a good example of outsider vs. insider viewpoints

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2 See Michael F. Brown, 1997, *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age*. Cambridge: Harvard

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