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## “IRRATIONAL” BELIEFS IN DISEASE CAUSATION AND TREATMENT II

Mon. Sept. 15, 2008

Read: Finish Fadiman

- I. Review of Wed. discussion:
  - A. Return to the examples of “irrational beliefs” about harm presented last Wed.
    1. First type: “Step on a crack, break your mother’s back”
      - a. If people really believed this it would be an example of magic, using the typology I provided last time
        - 1) The idea that something happens automatically—no supernatural beings mediate between the act and the effect
      - b. Remember: the typology I presented last Wed. is *one* way to distinguish between magic and religion
        - 1) Other classificatory schemes might subsume magic under religion
    2. Second type: “The gods did it”
      - a. Obviously a religious explanation, not magic
      - b. Supernatural beings with the power to produce healing or harm can be gods, ancestors, ghosts, demons, fairies, etc.
      - c. What’s important in our scheme is that the power doesn’t reside in the magician’s skills, it resides in the supernatural beings
    3. Third type: “he’s a pain in the neck”
      - a. Even though the meaning might be metaphorical, we understand the implied cause and effect
      - b. **Discuss:** how is this an “irrational” belief?
        - 1) It’s an example of symbolic harm
      - c. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me”

- 1) **Discuss:** what's true about this statement? Not true?
  - d. I mentioned last time that we can medicalize<sup>1</sup> this notion of symbolic harm:
    - 1) Explanation: the interaction was stressful and stress has produced the pain
    - 2) Medicine says we can measure degree of stress: "stress hormones"
  - e. But a step-by-step biomedical account will not provide a complete explanation
    - 1) Cannot describe all the links of the causal chain from the final cause, a symbol (speech) to a much more proximate cause, a high level of "stress" that produces pain
- B. Insider and outsider perspective
1. Biomedicine holds that AIDS can kill even if the sufferer doesn't know about/believe in the disease
    - a. It kills regardless of whether you're an insider or outsider
  2. But one has to be an insider to suffer the stress effects from speech
    - a. For starters, one has to speak the language
    - b. A pathology termed "voodoo death" in the anthropological literature describes how death can follow being cursed in some societies (Australian Aborigines) because the suffering is so extensive<sup>2</sup>
    - c. Clearly for death to happen, the sufferer has to be an insider—has to speak the language and believe that a curse can cause such harm
  3. In this class we have to shelve "insider" statements like "religion X is true"

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<sup>1</sup> See Irving Zola on medicalization: 1978. Healthism and disabling medicalization. In *Disabling professions* (pp. 41-68). Boston: Marion Boyars.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Cannon, 1942. "'Voodoo' Death." *American Anthropologist* 44: 169-181.

- a. Because this statement requires saying other religions are “untrue,” are “superstition” or “myth”
  - b. But anthropologists try to understand a given local world from an insider’s perspective as much as possible
  - c. So they take an “as if” perspective: “as if” it were true
  - d. Also, to say that people are superstitious is dismissive, a put-down
    - 1) And we try to treat other peoples and other cultures with respect
4. Anthropologists try to see a given belief system—a religion, for example—from the inside, from the perspective of the believer
- a. “To make the strange familiar”
  - b. But anthropologists are required to maintain an analytical distance, too, to always remain an outsider to some extent
    - 1) When they don’t maintain this distance they are said to have “gone native”
5. Anthropologists with religious beliefs must temporarily put them on a shelf when doing their anthropological analyses
- a. What you need to do in this class: it’s a kind of exercise, a kind of distance-creation between you and your beliefs
6. Some anthropologists hold that the investigator must *experience* another world,
- a. Experience these other systems of belief, to as great an extent as possible if one wants to really understand them
  - b. Very difficult: we cannot *make* ourselves believe something
  - c. **Discuss**
7. Tanya Lurhmann, whom you’re going to read:

- a. Studied witchcraft in modern-day England, and participated in the ceremonies (including those requiring nudity)<sup>3</sup>
  - b. This is called “participant-observation”
  - c. In her book she doesn’t tell us the extent to which she believed in the powers of witchcraft—if she did at all
  - d. She doesn’t need to—nor does Fadiman
  - e. What anthropologists need to do is provide as comprehensive a description and analysis as possible
- C. The anthropological endeavor is not about determining if something is correct or incorrect, or morally right or wrong
- 1. It is about *understanding* it, understanding it comprehensively
  - 2. “To make the strange familiar and the familiar strange”
- II. Kinds of explanations offered by anthropologists for why people hold “irrational” (from a Western point of view) beliefs
- A. First explanation: the beliefs are logical but their premises are flawed
  - B. Second explanation: these irrational beliefs are maintained because they satisfy psychological needs
  - C. Third explanation: irrational magical ideas come to seem normal or acceptable through a series of rationalizations—it’s a *process*
    - 1. Explains how well-educated Western pagans can come to believe what are, on the surface, patently untrue assumptions, statements about cause and effect, etc.
      - a. Luhrmann’s witches were London bank tellers, computer programmers—seemingly quite “modern” and “rational”
  - D. Fourth explanation: these beliefs are the direct result of experiences of another reality, another world
    - 1. But one journeys to this world *within oneself*

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<sup>3</sup> T.M. Luhrmann, 1989. *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.

- a. By practicing disciplines—mental, emotional—that involve shifts in consciousness, shifts in perception of one’s body and surroundings
  - b. Outsiders see these beliefs as a belief in magic, religion—“irrational”
    - 1) Insiders don’t—they think they really did travel to an astral plane, or were possessed by a spirit
  - c. This fourth explanation says that beliefs in these other planes, worlds *are* based on empirical observation
    - 1) The culturally-derived interpretation of these experiences is what is incorrect
    - 2) The *Newsweek* article I mentioned last time is an example
- E. Evidence can be found supporting all four types of explanations
- F. Varieties of religious thinking and experience co-vary with the kind of society
- 1. For example, hunter-gatherers tend to see themselves as a part of, rather than masters of, nature
    - a. For them, religion is inseparable from the rest of life
    - b. They don’t see themselves as trying to “control” natural forces, but trying to coexist with these forces, with nature
    - c. **Discuss:** compare with the Hmong
  - 2. At the other end of the power spectrum is our idea that through science and technology we will dominate nature, conquer her, solve the problems nature places in front of us
    - a. The assumption is that gaining this control will bring about an end to religion—seen as irrational, incorrect, superstitious
- III. “Irrational” beliefs in the West
- A. Urban myths:
- A business traveler is offered a drink at an airport and awakes in a hotel bath, his body submerged in ice. A note, taped to the wall, warns him not to move,

but to call 911. He is asked by the operator on duty to feel very carefully for a tube protruding from his back. If he finds one, he is instructed to remain absolutely still until paramedics arrive: both his kidneys have been harvested.

1. **Discuss:** Who has heard a variant of this story?
2. Why do these “urban myths” circulate so widely, and why do their narrators always insist the story is absolutely true?
  - a. What are the symbols here?
  - b. What are the anxieties?

**B. Exercise:** How is biomedicine a kind of religion for us?

1. How are doctors and medical researchers like priests for us?
2. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries many people believed that science would ultimately destroy religion by showing people the irrationality of their myths and rituals
  - a. It didn't happen: mainstream religions, at least some of them, are thriving in this country
  - b. The new fundamentalisms
  - c. The popularity of new religions, or religions containing elements borrowed from other, exotic traditions (Hare Krishna during the 1960s and 1970s)
    - 1) New Age adherents using Native American healing rituals
  - d. Certain “irrational” traditions in the West are thriving
    - 1) Astrology
      - a) Scandal in the Reagan administration when it was discovered that Ronald and Nancy Reagan used it to determine policy
    - 2) Witchcraft, Paganism, occultism
      - a) I mentioned last time that channeling (communicating with dead people, like George Washington), is incredibly popular

3) Many people in this country believe in past lives

C. Clearly our need for some of what religion does has not been entirely taken care of by science

1. The Reagans wanted to know the best time to do things—prediction, divination—and so would we all
2. And we all get sick
3. Some people say that science has contributed to, even helped create this boom in religion
  - a. It has removed many traditional psychological props
  - b. And created, in its technological applications, a host of new problems
    - 1) Threat of nuclear catastrophe
    - 2) Health threats from pollution
    - 3) Technological advances that contribute to development but have unfortunate consequences as well
      - a) Deforestation in Africa seen to spread new strains like AIDS and Ebola virus

#### IV. Shamanism

A. Becoming a shaman

1. You pass through stages—difficult passage
  - a. These stages are often linked to myths
  - b. Apprentice will spend periods of time elsewhere, on other levels of the cosmos
    - 1) Apprentice is sometimes taught by spirit shamans, souls of dead shamans, etc.
2. In some societies anyone can become a shaman



- a. But this varies: sometimes a shaman acquires the ability against his will<sup>4</sup>
  - 1) In some societies shamans are seen as deviants and not highly respected
- b. Shamans are usually seen as having been chosen in some manner—becoming a shaman is not a decision one takes entirely on one’s own
- c. Sometimes shamans are those who went through a severe illness
  - 1) Taiwanese shamans
  - 2) Fadiman provides an example
- 3. In other societies one’s father or uncle was a shaman
  - a. Shamans are usually male, but not exclusively
    - 1) Korean, Japanese shamans can be women
- 4. Shamans often go through an elaborate course of training, often have high prestige
- 5. The problematic issue of abnormality in shamans
  - a. Some scholars theorize that they are more likely to be mentally ill, or have an unstable personality
    - 1) In one society the individual destined to become a shaman might be seen as specially gifted, but in another society he would be an outcast or worse
  - b. Another, biomedical, explanation: that going into trance produces a hormone that occasionally produces epilepsy
    - 1) Hence if you go into trance a lot, then you might be more likely to have seizures
- B. The shaman is essentially a religious entrepreneur who acts for a human client
  - 1. He or she intervenes or imposes his will on a supernatural agent

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<sup>4</sup> I use “his” because while female shamans can be found, male shamans are considerably more numerous.

- a. A ghost, a spirit, a god, an ancestor, etc.
- 2. Shamans are sometimes paid; at other times the added prestige authority and social power are all he/she gets
- C. What they actually do: a variety of practices
  - 1. Shamans' sleight-of-hand and ventriloquism are famous in the anthropological literature
    - a. But shamans aren't charlatans; they believe in what they do
  - 2. The shamanistic curing ceremonies might include communal ritual, herbs, trancing, dancing, divination, costume, fancy settings, etc.
- D. Functions mentioned in the literature on shamanism include:
  - 1. Shamans provide an opportunity for catharsis and release of tension, for the patient and the collectivity observing
    - a. Partly through the drama of their performance
  - 2. Shamanic rituals provide psychological assurance
  - 3. Shamans cure illness
  - 4. Shamans are a focal point of attention for a society
    - a. For good
    - b. For evil
      - 1) If shamans are seen to have abused their power, they may be driven out or executed
      - 2) Think about this when you're reading Michael Brown's article for next Monday
  - 5. Shamans' diagnoses may be a kind of social control:
    - a. If a shaman divines that you are ill because you did something immoral, this diagnosis teaches a lesson to everyone about the need to stay on the straight and narrow