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**SHAMANISM, ONTOLOGY AND HUMAN EVOLUTION:
IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOTHERAPY**

This article examines the key theme that one encounters among shamans in hunting and gathering societies of the world – the control by the shaman over nature and animal, plant and celestial spirits – in order to make life psychologically more secure and satisfying. I will examine the branch of philosophy known as ontology, which studies the nature of existence or being. It has always struck me as paradoxical to juxtapose the belief systems of hunters and gatherers which are optimistic about man's control over nature, with the reality of the harsh and difficult environments that indeed have challenged them. Such individuals have little predictability over their food resources, they lack agriculture and harvesting potentials, but nonetheless by means of altered states of consciousness, often induced by hallucinogenic drugs, they hold beliefs that they can contact nether realms to make spirit forces of plants or animals act on their behalf.

In thinking about this paradox, I was greatly influenced by Ashley Montague's book, Touching, (1986), which argues that specific child rearing techniques among certain hunter/gathering peoples like the Inuit of the Arctic region of Canada give rise to a manifest optimism among adults, deriving from mother-child continuous skin contact. It is not unusual in Inuit society for the child to be tucked comfortably naked under the mother's parka for up to the first three and a half years of the child's life. This ontological security appears to be a crucial psychological variable in reinforcing a sense of optimism in the hunter, who indeed must see famine and food shortfalls around him through his life. Binford & Binford (1968) have argued convincingly that with global environmental changes during the immediate post-Pleistocene, hunters and gatherers began to grow beyond the carrying capacity of their environment. This forced them to migrate away from coastal areas and exploit marginal environments with no wild seas resources in abundance. Plant domestication, which occurs in the fairly recent past, would have been an adaptation to the very harsh and difficult environments exploited by these people (see also Berndt, R. & Berndt, C. (1964); Cosmides, L. & Tooby, J. (1987); Draper, P. (1976); Gould, R. (1969); Howell (1979); Price, R. & Brown, J. (1985); Siskind, J. (1975); Williams, N. & Hunn, E.). Needless to say, health and disease among these people would have been a major concern.

Since my academic background has combined training both in anthropology and psychology, I have also spent a good deal of time thinking about the psychological characteristics in cross-cultural perspective that make for a healthy individual. In my book, Amazon Healer, (1992) where I chronicle the life and times of an urban ayahuasca-using drug healer in the Peruvian Amazon (1992), I wrote about the "Biology of Hope." This is a concept that is gaining more interest in recent years in discussions about the efficacy of folk healers. The question is "how does healing occur?" Individuals' affective states may exacerbate and create risk in their immunological competency, so that diseases may preponderate. The three variables of helplessness, hopelessness, and loss which follow many stressors in the environment, can result in a person easily developing clinical depression, often with melancholic features. These as documented in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (1994) include a loss of interest or pleasure in all or almost all activities, a lack of reactivity to usually pleasurable stimuli. The individual's depressed mood does not improve, even temporarily when something good happens. There is often a distinct quality of depression that is regularly worse in the morning, with early morning awakening. Psychomotor retardation or agitation, significant anorexia or weight loss and excessive or inappropriate guilt can also be present. The

role of healers and shamen is to reverse their clients' negative affective feelings by alleviating the helplessness and hopelessness that such individuals experience. Depressed individuals frequently report feelings of helplessness and their catecholamine brain chemicals may become depleted, releasing corticosteroids in the body. These, in turn, depress the individual's immune function. When people experience emotional, social and environmental stresses that bring about changes in their lives, they often experience somatic dysfunction.

There are a number of levels involved, from the molecular to the cognitive. Seligman and colleagues have been examining the cognitive effects of helplessness, hopelessness and despair in human beings and have documented the extreme and disabling depressive disorders that easily result from these emotional states. If we extrapolate back in time among hunting and gathering societies of the Upper Paleolithic, we can postulate that the same mechanisms were at work.

Individuals experiencing these major depressive psychiatric syndromes would no doubt be disinclined to respond actively to life's challenges. Yet, we find again and again the belief system of shamanism, with its emphasis on the individual shaman (and there are generally various shamans among a small hunting group) who can exercise power and control over nature. They provide the group's members with secure expectations of enough food and water, ample food resources and fertility of the animals and of the society itself. Such a "psychotechnology" (Tart: 1985) would be very significant in enabling groups of people to be successful in the face of a difficult and often hostile environment, to get on with the business of survival. Thus, this deceptive belief in power and control, what Schumaker (1995) calls the "corruption of reality," and what anthropologists refer to as cultural constructions of reality, are important to consider here. Are hunters and gatherers creating illusions of self control and environmental control, to insulate themselves from the experience of emotional depression? Too much reality, as Schumaker (1995) argues, "impinges deleteriously on a person's emotional integrity." He argues that in the course of human evolution, human beings have sought psychological sanctuary in the form of illusion and self-deception. He argues that Homo sapiens have the ability to dismantle and reconstruct reality in strategic ways, namely through religion, which is the primary means by which culture fosters illusions that serve us. Further, by access to plant hallucinogens, the shaman in hunting and gathering societies experienced the sense of control personally, especially in the characteristics of morphing, the perception of the body changing into other forms, animal or bird, which feed the belief of animal familiars and tutelary spirits under the shaman's control, to further heighten personal power in service of the community.

In the remainder of this paper, shamanism, ontology and depression will be examined in greater detail.

Depression:

Garber and Seligman, in their book Human Helplessness (1980), wrote in great detail about the concept of control or power. If the individual believes that control rests with him/her (what the authors call controllability), then an individual believes that s/he can actually do something about an event. When one has control, it makes an aversive event more predictable. Overall, individuals seek information, and when faced with unpredictability and uncertainty, they strive for certainty. Uncertainty causes conflict and increases surprise and arousal. Individuals choose control because having control does improve an aversive outcome. The individual with control expects a less aversive outcome than the individual without control. When individuals have control, they attribute this control to an internal stable factor, namely their own responding. When danger is controllable, the individual attributes its effect to himself. When danger is uncontrollable, the individual has to make alternate, external attributions that are more unstable (Miller & Grant, 1978). We see this occurring among shamen who attribute defeat to the superior power of malevolent spirits. The maximum danger that people face must not be viewed as

capricious, but stable. Internal factors such as one's own response generally tend to be more stable than external factors.

Seligman and colleagues argue that there is an inherent value to control, per se. It enables the individual most optimally to match his/her internal states with external events. This matching is the means by which the individual can improve an aversive outcome. Bandura (1977) argues that personal control endows individuals with a high sense of self efficacy or perceived ability to cope with aversive events. When the individuals expect to minimize the event by avoidance, they have little reason to fear it. They do not engage in repetitive perturbing ideation. This reduces their level of anxiety and arousal. Individuals who however judge themselves not to be efficacious expect more aversive events. This, in turn, generates stress-inducing thoughts, and causes them high levels of anxiety and arousal.

Shamanism and Ontology:

It is interesting to note that both hunters/gatherers of the Upper Paleolithic period and human beings in advanced industrial societies have much in common: both have been obsessed with an attempt to dominate the earth in which they live. The field of ontology is concerned with the study of being, the basic characteristics of reality. Perry (1976) in discussing neorealism, argues about the incapacity of the mind to transcend its private experience, leading to an egocentric predicament. Human beings have always tried to distinguish sharply between what they call reality and what they recognize or suspect are merely the products of their own cognition. The sub-discipline of phenomenology has always taken a fresh approach to concretely experienced phenomena - as free as possible from conceptual presuppositions. Husserl wrote about the life-world, the world shaped with the immediate experience of each person. Heidegger's metaphysics talked about human beings finding themselves in the center, as well as the attempt of Western man to dominate the earth by controlling beings considered as objects (cited in Kisiel 1993).

Shamanic states of Consciousness:

Commonly found throughout the vast literature on shamanism is the actual state of consciousness, or trance, that characterizes the behavior of the shamanic religious practitioner. The trance state has been discussed most recently under the rubric of dissociation (Spiegel, 1994). As Schumaker (1995) argues, the human brain has the capacity to dissociate itself from its own data and selectively perceive its environment, selectively process information and store memories.

Dissociation is the faculty that enables all types of trance states seen among shamans, from the simple altered state to a possession trance. Dissociation is seen as two cognitive states, where there are streams of mental activity that are multiple and simultaneous, both of which influence experience. One of these streams influences mental life outside phenomenal awareness and voluntary control. While in a dissociated state, individuals experience a loss of usual interrelationships between various groups of mental processes and there is almost an independent functioning of one aspect of mental process separated from the rest. There is a compartmentalization of information, which is deflected from integration with its usual associations.

Arthur Ludwig (1983:93-99) has argued that these dissociative faculties have evolved to empower us to a) transcend reality, b) escape from conflict and trauma, c) make possible social cohesion, and d) to provide neurological relief via repetition.

Certainly, dissociation is a common factor in all trances and the trance state is co-terminous with the concept of shamanism in particular.

Self-deception, or the construction of reality:

There is an adaptive value of self-deception, particularly with regard to the illusion of self and environmental control, which we can argue is inversely related to depression. Illusions insulate people from the experience of emotional depression. Schumaker argues that failure to impose adequate acts of distortive cognitive bias concerning the control that we have over life events causes depression.

Taylor (1989), in his book on positive illusions and creative self-deception, writes that illusions increase one's capacity for productive and creative work. They facilitate certain aspects of intellectual functioning, improve memory relating to focused tasks, while inhibiting disturbing memories that can interfere with performance. Illusions increase an individual's level of motivation and aspiration and his/her ability to persist toward specific goals. Such illusions improve the quality of performance and increase a person's likelihood of success, allowing us to cope more effectively with tragedy. We can argue that religion evolved for reasons of survival and enhanced coping. The religion of shamanism characterizes more than 99% of human prehistory, from the Australopithecinae to Homo sapiens.

Shamanic Ontology and the Psychotherapist:

As a licensed psychotherapist with a "generic" state license to use whatever technique(s) are appropriate to healing the mental health problems presented by patients, I have found over the last nine years that my field studies of shamens in Peru and elsewhere have been very influential in my world view and practice. When I was a graduate student preparing for my second career, I remember one of my teachers stating very clearly, "...now remember, you must never lose control of the psychotherapy hour." In that sense, while my training in psychotherapy has been eclectic and has included a variety of interventions, ranging from psychoanalysis, cognitive approaches, behavior modification, etc., I have never forgotten this maxim. One must always appear to know what one is doing. In a choice of which therapeutic intervention to elect, I avoid Rogerian client-centered therapy, for example, as well as non-committal psychoanalytic interventions. The lessons that I have learned from shamanic healing have been to be directive, not insight oriented. Many western psychotherapists do not confer a sense of ontological security on their clients such as that experienced by those individuals in the presence of a shamanic healer who is deemed to be all powerful and in control of nature. Such a healer is expected to use his gifts to serve the individual and the community. As I continue to work in the field of psychotherapy, I find myself turning more and more to shamanic elements to enhance my own interventions with clients. I have eschewed psychodynamic, insight-oriented therapeutic modalities for more directive, cognitively based approaches. Like other psychotherapists, I hang up all my diplomas, and present a confident, optimistic stance, often informing my patients of how their particular problem has been solved by me in the past, or more modestly, cite research publications, the symbols of my sub-culture to demonstrate the efficacy of my work.

Conclusion:

This paper has attempted to consolidate a number of elements important in the anthropology of consciousness, particularly with regard to the apparent paradox of shamanic beliefs among hunter/gathering societies and the reality of harshness, food shortfall, death and potential for clinical depression. The "Biology of Hope" which appears to have been a major influence in the survivability of the human species has implications for modern-day psychotherapeutic practice, in terms of effectiveness of interventions and a worldview derivable from shamanic beliefs.

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