Shamanic Medicine in Singapore: Healing or Curing?

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In modern day Singapore, a form of Chinese shamanic medicine called dang-ki continues to be practiced. Prospective dang-ki patients enter shrine halls adorned with altars displaying Taoist and Buddhist deities. The patients slip off their shoes, take a queue number to see the shaman, and greet deity statues with burning incense. When the shaman is ready to give a consultation, he begins a ritual inviting a spirit to possess his body while assistants chant in the background (Lee et al. 2010:66-67).

Through this ceremony, the shaman is believed to become possessed by a deity. This possession is thought to allow the shaman to act as an intermediary between humans and the spirit world, and in doing so, heal his patients (Lee et al. 2010:57). While possessed, the shaman writes magical characters on a Taoist talisman paper called fu, which the patient then keeps. He also offers verbal advice and may perform physical interventions like pulse palpation or acupuncture. The consultation ends when the deity leaves the shaman’s body and he regains consciousness (Lee et al. 2010:66-67, 69).

Symbolic Healing

These shamanic sessions are experienced by most patients as at least somewhat helpful, even for alleviating physical ailments such as hypertension, gastric problems, and pain (Lee et al. 2010:68; Kleinman and Sung 1979:12). Indeed, practitioners of Taoism in Singapore often use these supernatural fu prescribed by shamans as a source of protection and comfort in their daily lives (Chew 2009:10). But how do fu and shamanic sessions ‘work’ as a form of medicine?

The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss hypothesized that shamanic medicine may function through a direct coupling of language-based experience and biological reality. In his famous work “The Effectiveness of Symbols,” Lévi-Strauss argues that a Cuna shaman was able to aid his patient’s obstructed labor through the telling of a myth that corresponded to the physical world (Lévi-Strauss 1963:201). This hypothesis has been largely dismissed by subsequent social scientists (e.g., Kirmayer 1993:168). Nonetheless, could shamanic medicine have some impact on patient physiology, or is its function purely social?

Healing versus Curing

Useful distinctions have been made in medical anthropology between the terms ‘disease’ and ‘illness’ and between the terms ‘curing’ and ‘healing.’ In general, these distinctions have been predicated on a separation of the physical world from the mental world. Disease is defined as a natural process based upon a biophysical...
reality. Illness, in contrast, is based upon feelings, ideas, values, language, and gestures that construct a particular experience (Kleinman 1973:209). The anthropologists Arthur Kleinman and Lilias Sung use this disease versus illness dichotomy to argue that modern professional healthcare aims to treat disease, while traditional healing systems treat illness (Kleinman and Sung 1979:8). In this framework of ‘disease’ versus ‘illness,’ shamanic medicine would be expected to treat the social aspects of illness, but not the physical aspects of disease.

The term ‘curing’ emphasizes the removal of physiological malfunctions and is therefore effective from the view of modern biomedicine, while the term ‘healing’ emphasizes the repairing of emotional and social aspects of illness and is therefore effective from the view of the sick individual and those around him or her (Young 1983:1208; Waldram 2000:604). Both curing and healing as separate entities have shortcomings. Healing without curing fails to treat the disease and so fails to remove the root pathology. Curing without healing attempts to remove the pathology, but at the potential expense of quality of life (Eisenberg 1977:19). These dichotomies of disease versus illness and curing versus healing become particularly problematic when attempting to determine the biophysical effects, if any, of shamanic medicine. If the intention of a ritual is to treat illness and heal, can it also cure a disease?

**The Placebo Effect**

The anthropologist James Waldram has suggested that the placebo effect could explain the reported biophysical benefits of traditional healing like shamanic medicine (Waldram 2000:617). Placebos are currently used in modern biomedicine as controls in randomized trails to assess the effectiveness of treatments because they lack a biomedically active agent (Kaptchuk 2002:817). However, while placebos lack an active agent, research has shown that they are still capable of producing a physiological response. Interestingly, changes seen in the brain due to a placebo-response usually closely match the active drug-response that the individual was expecting (Benedetti et al. 2005:10398). Furthermore, research has shown that these physiological changes are specific, predictable and replicable (Faria 2008:473).

The disorders that placebos are most effective at improving are strikingly similar to the disorders that shamanic medicine also most effectively treats. In a study by Kleinman and Sung on shamanic medicine in Taiwan, 90% of the patients studied had chronic illnesses like low back pain or arthritis, self-resolving disorders, and non-specific complaints that were categorized as somatization with depression, anxiety neurosis, or other psychological problems. Shamans were effective at healing these disorders but were not normally sought to treat severe acute disorders like stroke (Kleinman and Sung 1979:7,12,16). Kleinman and Sung categorized many of these patient’s ailments as psychological issues presented as physical complaints. It could be argued that shamanic medicine acts as a form...
of psychological therapy for these patients and so treats only the social aspects of illness. However, shamanic medicine and placebos have been shown to alleviate symptoms for a variety of disorders.

In particular, placebos have repeatedly been shown to be effective at decreasing the experience of pain (Moerman 2002:18-20). Biomedical research on the placebo effect can therefore explain the pain alleviation that patients feel in symbolic healing. Placebos have also been shown to be effective at alleviating symptoms beyond pain. In one study, participants with asthma had significantly reduced bronchial hyperreactivity after being given placebo bronchodilator inhalers (Kemeny et al. 2007:1375). In another study, Parkinson’s disease patients who were given placebo (saline) injections showed reduced activity of single neurons in the subthalamic nucleus of the brain, and these changes were correlated with clinical improvement (Benedetti et al. 2004:587).

However, placebo effects do not necessarily treat the root pathology of disorders. It has been shown that patients suffering from osteoarthritis experience significant reductions in symptoms when given a placebo, but no improvement are shown on X-rays (Doherty 2009:1260). Moreover, for certain disorders, like diabetes, placebo effects are nonexistent (Kirsch 2005:792). These findings are consistent with the finding that shamanic medicine is experienced as effective at treating only certain disorders and not others.

Conclusions
The effectiveness of shamanic medicine in Singapore and placebos in biomedicine is a testament to the ability of the mind to impact physical experience. This impact has its limitations, but nonetheless makes problematic the binary distinctions of ‘disease’ versus ‘illness’ and ‘healing’ versus ‘curing.’

REFERENCES CITED