Ritual Healing as a Form of Transpersonal Psychotherapy

Timothy Thomason, Northern Arizona University
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Timothy C. Thomason
Northern Arizona University

Author Note: Timothy C. Thomason is a Professor in the Educational Psychology Department at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona.

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Citation for this article:

Abstract

This paper makes the case that Native American ritual healing can be conceptualized as a form of transpersonal psychotherapy. In the past such healing rituals and ceremonies have often been seen as primitive or exotic treatments with little or no real effect on people. But when used to treat people with psychological disorders, the spiritual healing rituals used by Native Americans can be effective and could be seen as fitting within the transpersonal model of psychotherapy. This brings ritual healing within the domain of psychological healing and should make it more acceptable to counselors who work with Native American clients.
Ritual Healing as a Form of Transpersonal Psychotherapy

Indigenous healers in cultures throughout the world use a wide variety of methods to help people who are experiencing psychological distress. Sometimes healers use herbs or physical treatments like massage. Sometimes a treatment combines the physical and the psychological, as in the sweat lodge ceremony, which is thought to purify the person's body and psyche (Cohen, 2003). However, in traditional Native American cultures, ritual healing is often the treatment of choice for a psychological problem (Hultkrantz, 1992). Rituals and ceremonies can have great healing power by reducing anxiety and distress, relaxing the body, and reconnecting the person to the community. They may also mobilize internal mechanisms such as the release of endorphins, the body's natural pain killers (McClenon, 2002). This paper describes some aspects of ritual healing, with a focus on its transpersonal nature. Transpersonal psychology is the study of phenomena that may transcend the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels of existence, such as spirituality, meditation, and altered states of consciousness (Boorstein, 1996). The reliance of many types of ritual healing on spiritual concepts and altered states of consciousness make it transpersonal in nature.

Although there are commonalities in how ritual healing works in indigenous cultures throughout the world, this paper primarily examines its role in Native American cultures. While the details of how ritual healing is done vary by culture and tribe, the overall context, assumptions, and purposes of such rituals seem to be similar in indigenous cultures worldwide (Winkelman, 1992).

There are many complexities inherent in studying indigenous cultures. One issue is the danger of treating all such cultures as if they are alike. For example, it would be a
mistake to assume that the hundreds of Native American tribes share the same traditions, beliefs, or healing ceremonies (Utter, 1993). On the other hand, research has shown that there are certain similarities among tribes, at least at a high level of abstraction (Cohen, 2003). As a general statement, indigenous cultures do have specialists who work to help those who are ill, and healing methods tend to have a religious, spiritual, and/or supernatural dimension. In addition, tribal healers tend to treat the psychological problems of their clients with ritual or ceremonial methods that are culturally specific (Cohen, 2003).

Another complication is that most indigenous cultures do not distinguish between psychological and physical problems the way physicians and psychologists in the Euro-American tradition do (Duran & Duran, 1995). But problems that could be considered primarily psychological (such as depression and anxiety disorders) do clearly exist in indigenous populations (Manson, 2000). There are also culture-bound psychological syndromes that are specific to certain Native American tribes such as "soul loss" and "ghost sickness" (APA, 2000).

According to Sandner (1996) "soul loss" is a major cause of illness among traditional Native American people, and can be considered a form of depression. Soul loss is thought to occur when the person's soul is separated from the body or possessed by an evil power, resulting in a loss of interest in life. The healer tries "to cure soul loss by enticing the soul back into the body with prayers and rituals" (p. 147) or by entering a deep trance and traveling into the other world to retrieve the lost soul. This technique was practiced by healers in the Shoshone and Northwest Coast tribes until recent times (Sandner, 1996).
Some Native American psychologists have suggested that many Native Americans can be diagnosed as suffering from the psychological effects of having been colonized (Duran & Duran, 1995). The high suicide rate among Native Americans (at least twice the national average) suggests that depression in particular is a common disorder, as is alcoholism (Manson, 2000).

The Euro-American emphasis on separating physical illnesses from psychological disorders is usually attributed to the philosophical legacy of Descartes, whose metaphysical dualism suggested that mind is separate from body (Cohen, 2003). When professional specialties developed in Europe and America, physicians devoted themselves to treating the body, and psychologists focused on the psyche (variously described as the mind, emotions, or personality). Neither physicians nor psychologists took the spiritual or transpersonal realm of the soul as their focus. But the conceptual split between mind and body took place very recently in history, and only in the Greco-Roman and Euro-American traditions. Apparently the people in indigenous cultures never thought humans were divided in that way, and many still do not (Cohen, 2003).

Traditionally-minded Native Americans view the human being holistically, and a spiritual energy is assumed to pervade the universe. Tribal healers often see what they do as manipulating spiritual energy to heal the client by restoring them to a state of harmony (Locust, 1990). What tribal healers see as a spiritual treatment, psychologists tend to see as a psychological treatment (Torrey, 1986).

When considering the potential healing effects of rituals and ceremonies, it is necessary to define what is meant by the term healing. A useful distinction can be made between curing an illness and healing a disorder. Some physical illnesses, such as an
infection, can be cured with an antibiotic. But it is more useful to think of psychological disorders, such as depression or anxiety, being healed in the sense that the distress is reduced or relieved (Thompson, 2005). Often a reasonable goal for psychotherapy is improvement in mood and a decrease in symptoms, rather than producing a "cure."

Although the mind/body split is an artificial distinction, and metaphysical dualism is no longer respectable in scientific and medical circles, it is hard to avoid seeing some problems as primarily physical and others as primarily psychological.

Physicians (and medicine people) are often able to cure diseases using medicines or physical treatments, especially when the disease is a biological disturbance that occurs independent of culture. However, the treatment of psychological disturbances is less reliable, because treatments based on naturalistic medicine may not be available, and because the meaning of a psychological disorder is often an integral part of the condition. This is not true of diabetes and tuberculosis as far as we know, but it is true of all the disorders in the psychiatric diagnostic manual (Keen, 1998).

In cultures where the naturalistic, scientific etiology of a disease is poorly understood, treatment by a medicine person mainly addresses the client's experience of symptoms and the meanings of those symptoms. Yet this treatment may well be effective in treating the client's illness (distress) if not the disease. For the cultural treatment to be effective, the patient would have to believe that it would be helpful. A Navajo might be healed by participating in a tribal ceremony that would have no effect on a non-Navajo. The Navajo patient might still suffer from a physical disease, but feel much better after the ceremony. On the other hand, if their "disease" was a psychological disorder like
anxiety or depression, the Navajo might well experience both curing and healing through participation in the tribal ceremony (Silversmith, 1994).

Ritual healing techniques are especially well suited for the treatment of psychological distress and disorders, because they operate symbolically. Rituals and ceremonies are symbolic in the same way that counseling and psychotherapy are symbolic; they all involve the manipulation of symbols (words, ideas, art, myths, etc.) to benefit the client (Sandner, 1991). Counselors typically use words and ideas to facilitate change in their clients, while tribal healers primarily use rituals and ceremonies that incorporate the art, religious beliefs, or mythology of their specific tribe. Like the psychotherapist, the tribal healer conducts healing rituals using a tribe-specific system of symbols to restore the client to a state of health (Frank & Frank, 1991).

Explanations for healing differ according to who is doing the explaining. Tribal healers often see healing as a spiritual process and may call on or channel supernatural forces (Winkelman, 1992). Euro-American psychologists are more likely to see ritual healings within a naturalistic paradigm, and explain them in terms of hypnosis, the power of belief, expectations, or other nonspecific effects (McClenon, 2002). Empirical research is unlikely to be able to settle this philosophical problem. Regardless of how and why ritual healing methods work, there are many anecdotal reports that they do work (Cohen, 2003; Mehl-Madrona, 1997; Kalweit; 1992), at least in the sense that they help people feel better. Given the absence of reliable reports of supernatural cures resulting from ritual healing, presumably most Western psychologists apply Occam's razor and conclude that ritual healing works because of well-established psychological principles.
Native American ritual healing can be conceptualized as transpersonal because of the assumptions of the tribal healers. The general rule is that illness (and especially psychological illness) results from a disturbed relationship with the supernatural (Hultkrantz, 1992). While transpersonal psychology can be difficult to define, the word transpersonal is often used as a synonym for the word spiritual (Sutich, 1980). Transpersonal psychologists see spirituality as the third level of reality thought to exist beyond the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. Since there can be no empirical demonstration that a spiritual, non-physical realm exists outside human consciousness, transpersonal psychology is somewhat controversial.

However, transpersonal psychologists often focus on aspects of a realm beyond the personal and interpersonal levels that are not explicitly spiritual or supernatural. Examples of such topics include meditation, dreams, the psychology of Buddhism (a religion that has no concept of god), and the altered states of consciousness that can be produced by isolation, certain psychoactive drugs, and repetitive behaviors such as chanting, drumming, and whirling (Boorstein, 1996). Many Native American ritual healing practices are transpersonal because they take advantage of the healing potential inherent in altered states of consciousness.

The idea that altered states of consciousness exist is not controversial; everyone has dreams, and many people have experienced an altered state after ingesting alcohol or drugs. Dreams may have a psychologically healing, or at least restorative function, and some people claim that psychedelic drugs have therapeutic potential (Scotton, Chinen & Battista, 1996). Members of the Native American Church use peyote in religious rituals, and there are reports of peyote being used successfully to treat alcoholism (Jenkins,
Few people would doubt that meditation can produce a profound state of relaxation, which has obvious psychological benefits in addition to physiological benefits such as decreasing blood pressure.

Native American ritual healing methods include several activities that are effective in producing an altered state of consciousness (Cohen, 2003). For example, rhythmic drumming at a certain speed may induce hypnotic trance, as can singing and dancing when done in a ritual context. The traditional Native American vision quest involves isolation in an extreme environment, fasting, and consciously seeking to have a vision, which might be seen as a form of self-hypnosis (Jenkins, 2004). Sitting on a sand painting to absorb healing energy while the healer chants a ceremony could also induce a receptive state of mind which could facilitate psychological healing. The spiritual context of ritual healing and the utilization of altered states of consciousness is what makes it transpersonal.

Shamanism is a family of traditions whose practitioners voluntarily enter altered states of consciousness to interact with spiritual entities to heal people or help their communities. Shamanism may be 25,000 years old, and is found in cultures all over the world. According to Walsh (1990, p. 101) "fully 90% of the world's cultures make use of one or more institutionalized altered states of consciousness, and in traditional societies these are, almost without exception, sacred states." The focus on spirit travel (or soul journeys) while in altered states of consciousness distinguishes shamans from most Native American medicine people. However, there is not necessarily a clear demarcation between shamans and Native American healers, since Native American healers often use rituals and ceremonies that utilize altered states of consciousness (Cohen, 2003).
To prepare for healing, shamans may go for a day or more without food, sleep, sex, and even water. They may also spend extended time in solitude, contemplation, and prayer, and subject themselves to extremes of temperature in cold streams or hot sweat lodges (Walsh, 1990). Shamanic techniques for inducing altered states of consciousness include intense rhythmic stimulation such as dancing and drumming and sometimes the ingestion of a hallucinogenic drug. Any or all of these techniques may be sufficient to alter the shaman's state of consciousness (Walsh, 1996).

Native American healers typically do not ingest hallucinogenic drugs (with the exception of peyote in the Native American Church), but they often utilize the other shamanic techniques (Anderson, 1980). For example, among the Plains Indians, the vision quest was the primary means of establishing a link with the spirit world, and was the basis for most healing rituals (Sandner, 1996). While the specific form of the vision quest varies from group to group, it usually involves isolation in a secluded place outdoors, such as on a sacred mountain, without food or water for four days and nights. It is easy to understand that given this preparation and the motivation of the person pursuing a vision, it is highly likely that a vision will be seen. The communal ritual of the Sun Dance of the Lakota Sioux involves rigorous fasting and dancing and "the intense pain of wooden pegs piercing the flesh of the dancer's chest and attached by strong cord to the central pole . . . . as the pegs tear through his flesh, the dancer is in ecstatic union with his sun father (Sandner, 1996, p. 151).

Carl Jung's therapeutic technique of active imagination could be seen as a gentle form of vision quest, without the isolation, deprivation, and pain. In active imagination the mind is stilled, and eventually a spontaneous mental image is allowed to enter
awareness. The image is focused on and allowed to play itself out. Afterward, the client makes a drawing or writes a story, and finally the experience is incorporated into everyday life (Sandner, 1996).

Altered states of consciousness that may facilitate psychological healing can be produced in many ways. Sensory deprivation can alter consciousness, and Barnouw (1985) described a sensory deprivation method of dissociative trance induction used by Canada's Ojibwa Indians. Sometimes Ojibway boys who were approaching puberty and wanted to become healers would be sent out to an isolated area where they would build a platform high in a tree and lie there and fast in hopes of being visited by a guardian spirit. According to Schumaker (1995, p. 72), "this prolonged period of sensory and nutritional deprivation undoubtedly helped some boys to enter a dissociative trance." The boys' reports of their encounters with the guardian spirits were remarkably consistent, and were similar to the stories adult Ojibway healers had told the boys about their encounters with the spirits. In a process of autosuggestion, the boys' visions fit a culturally prescribed pattern which made the trance state highly meaningful (Schumaker, 1995).

Although sensory deprivation can facilitate trance, sensory bombardment can also facilitate trance. Native Americans have used drumming (sonic driving) as a method for inducing trance for hundreds of years. Shamans go into self-hypnotic trances, and the rhythm of the drum takes them on a journey. Many shaman's drums are made of horsehide, and the shaman "rides" the spirit horse into the spirit realm. Repetitive and monotonous songs and dances are common in shamanic ritual. According to Schumaker (1995, p. 67), "throughout the ages, many indigenous cultures have made use of repetitive
drumming, chanting, or dancing as a means for people to become absorbed and to enter into trance. This then paved the way for . . . shamanistic healing techniques."

This paper has made the argument that the ritual healing practices of Native American healers can be seen as a form of transpersonal psychotherapy. Traditional ritual healing techniques assume the existence of a spiritual realm and often involve the elicitation of altered states of consciousness. These practices are not psychotherapy as it is usually defined (having a series of conversations focused on personal concerns) but the outcome is often the same in the sense that personal distress and psychological symptoms are decreased. In the words of Hultkrantz (1992, p. 3), "The medicine man is basically a psychotherapist."

There are important implications for seeing ritual healing as a kind of transpersonal psychotherapy. One implication is that ritual healing should not be seen as an exotic superstitious practice, since it has real effects and can be readily explained by standard scientific and psychological principles. If ritual healing is a legitimate part of psychological healing, then discrimination against it is unjustified. Another implication is that counselors should not hesitate to refer Native American clients who have traditional beliefs about healing to tribal healers. Seeing ritual healing as a form of transpersonal psychotherapy brings it within the realm of psychological healing without denying its reliance on culturally specific spiritual concepts. Such an approach should promote respect for Native Americans and their healing traditions.
References


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