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Final Exam

Final Exam Question:

The “placebo effect,” while posing and interpretive dilemma for modern medicine, has resulted in stimulating research integrating the theoretical positions of biomedicine and anthropology. What does the “placebo effect” or the efficacy of the placebo in clinical drug trials, for example, imply for our understanding of illness, healing, and ritual.

The power of belief and its effect on the human body is most evident in the example of the placebo effect. The placebo effect, that unconscious power of the mind to alter one's health and well being due to what one believes they have been given, has implications far beyond simple mind over matter, or positive thinking. It implies that the human mind has more power than we had at once thought, over the chemical reactions and abilities of our bodies to combat illness. Additionally, the placebo effect, causes us, as anthropologists, to look differently at the uses and effects of ritual and belief among native cultures, and even our own culture.

Belief can be one of the most powerful forces in a person's life. It can be the center of one's life and the focus of much of an adherents energy and thought. It is not surprising then, that it can have an actual chemical effect on a believer's body. Without asking or even attempting to answer the question about whether there is a human “spirit” or “soul,” or even the question of whether there is a supernatural force at work, we can study the effects of those who believe and take part in ritual healing on a regular basis. In the pentecostal tradition it is common to lay hands on the ill, in order to pass some sort of spiritual energy from the group, into the body of the

afflicted. In this tradition, God passes through the bodies of the people, into the diseased body of the person being prayed for, or even directly into that body, when distance precludes the laying on of hands. In addition, I have even seen people lay hands on a relative of the sick person, in an attempt to heal that person by proxy, if the ill person cannot be present, or is some distance from the group. People have reported lowered blood pressure, and even a sense of well being and calmness. The real effects of prayer seem to be varied in their effectiveness, depending upon the affliction being treated and the level of belief within the individual, to put it simply. By this, I mean the following: if the laying on of hands, and prayer, indeed lowers blood pressure, this can be good or bad depending on the illness. Also, if a person has a feeling of well-being, they may not feel they need to seek medical help for their condition, resulting in the worsening of that condition over time.

Ritual in other cultures, has a similar effect, in my opinion. It can be something positive, or something negative, depending on the illness or affliction being treated. However, the power of belief is quite apparent, and should not be scoffed at in the larger scheme of things. The placebo effect is powerful, and cannot be ignored. Belief and ritual can aid in overall well being and health as well, in many cultures, by comforting and reducing stress. Some studies have shown that prayer and ritual can release healing chemicals in the body such as dopamine (<http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/abstract/sci:293/5532/1164>) and pain reducing chemicals such as endorphins

<http://www.hopkinsbayview.org/healthcarenews05/05082604.html>). Prayer, ritual and belief may also effect serotonin levels, causing a change in the feeling of “well being” for those who believe strongly.

The implication here is clear; that the human mind is more powerful than we had at once believed, where health and healing is concerned. A patient's belief system and or ritualistic behavior must be taken into account when a doctor makes a diagnosis, or suggests a course of treatment. Whether for good or bad, the placebo effect seems at this point to be something very real and powerful, and something that deserves further study. A placebo can come in many forms beyond ritualistic or religious behavior as well, the touch of a loved ones hand, the sound of their voice, music, sunshine on a warm summer day. All of these can affect the human body and mind in positive ways by releasing the chemicals I've mentioned earlier, or by causing a simple change in serotonin levels, increasing a feeling of well being in a person who is not even ill. How much of the world around us, our activities, habits, and lifestyles, has an effect on our well being should also be taken into account. The body and the mind are a system working together, and should be studied as such.