

“It All Seems So Simple Now”: The Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine for Sense-Making”

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Abstract:

The practice of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in the United States has grown rapidly since the mid-1970s. But why are people attracted to these alternative practices and therapies? Drawing on social-psychological theory, this study explores people's CAM use in the context of the shortcomings of conventional medical encounters. In-depth interviews with 20 CAM users reveal that people use two key concepts found in virtually all types of CAM, mind-body connection and vitalism, as resources for therapeutic sense-making. People use CAM to make sense of physical problems such as debilitating back injuries, as well as non-physical problems, such as divorce and eating disorders. A gender pattern in CAM use is also examined. Drawing upon feminist theory, this study makes a significant contribution to a much needed understanding of how and why women's and men's CAM use differ. Women's CAM use is seen as an attempt to reinterpret the conditions that cause their suffering, while men's CAM use is seen as an attempt to change the conditions that cause their problems.

Analytic Themes:

- I. Setting the Stage: failed medical encounters
- II. “Using CAM”: Concepts and language to reframe and make sense of problems
- III. Contextualizing women's and men's CAM use
- IV. Simultaneously reproducing and challenging the gender order

Data

The following are excerpts that serve as poignant examples of how people used two main theoretical concepts, found in nearly all types of CAM, to make sense of their experiences:

Vitalism:

Mickey: It's so awkward to have somebody just say not only 'I, [but] "we" as a conglomerate here at the health center do not accept what you just said as valid and true. Candida is not real'. Like your intestines can not be affected? [I was like] you guys have got to be kidding me! And then I ended up later getting diverticulitis. So I always wondered if it was all connected cause I think that chakra takes the hit in my body you know... I mean now it seems so simple. That the [chakras] need to be flowing and rotating and the energy centers—you need to be open. Like if you're just talking simple. Your energy needs to be flowing in and throughout you. But if you have blocked [chakras], for emotional reasons—people who have heart attacks, they're just stuck right here [points to chest].

The Mind-Body Connection

Erika: [A]fter that [discovering pregnant in third trimester]—I don't know my body at all. I don't know there's a living being that's growing in it, that was the spark that I needed to take control of my health and of my life....now I feel like I'm in control with my body and more in touch with it and that's what, to me, all of these things [complementary and alternative practices] do. They teach you how to listen to your body and how to nourish it accordingly. And how to heal it with itself and with your mind. You know, I believe you can

heal anything with your mind and with good intention. I mean I really think that. Like maybe not heal it in the exact way that you believe that you will, but I think that in some way you can transform injuries in your body, and the health of your body, with your mental mind.

Women's Use: Reproducing and Challenging the Gender Order

Robyn: You know, [yoga] gave me a deeper connection to myself... I would work so hard and be so hard on myself ... my marriage was certainly a product of that mentality. Because John was— he was psychologically abusive to me. And I would take everything that he said...He'd call me names and things. So you know it's just what I was attracting in my life and the lessons that I had to learn... And so I'm really happy that we were together because he taught me the lesson of standing up for myself and aligning with what I need. Because I had never really put my needs first in my life. Cause I was so used to just like pleasing other people and doing what was right for other people... And I feel like [yoga], and the philosophy is what gave me the strength and the firmness and the ability to step out of something that was really unhealthy for me, and get through it, and be good with that.

Conclusion

This study situates women's and men's CAM use in a social and political context. Social location is particularly important for understanding how women, a socially and economically marginalized group, use CAM. CAM offers a theoretical stance, and the accompanying language, women can use to re-frame their problems as meaningful. Women can also use theories to restore a desirable self, feel more in control of their bodies and lives, and challenge hegemonic medical practices. Yet there is a paradox that occurs in women's CAM use. I argue that the same concepts women use to make sense of their problems are the same ones that mystify the social causes of their problems. Women's CAM use seems to simultaneously reinforce and challenge an oppressive gender order.

Understanding the appeal of CAM in this way can help policy makers, practitioners, and CAM users understand the multi-faceted reasons and consequences of CAM use. On a policy level, CAM use can be seen as a response to the authoritarian, and arguably, narrow focus in treatment that plagues our healthcare system. I argue that women's CAM use is also a response to the gender inequality that marginalizes women's experiences in almost every sphere of our social life, including healthcare.

If users and practitioners are mindful of the nature of the problems for which women seek CAM, perhaps these therapies can integrate a broader dialogue about the social causes of women's problems. Knowing the root cause of a problem, be it social, physical, or energetic has powerful therapeutic effects.

Contact Information

I welcome any comments or feedback you have regarding my presentation! Thank you for attending this roundtable session.

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