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Introduction to Special Topic Section: Shamanism

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Introduction to Special Topic Section: Shamanism

Historically, orthodox science has tended to dismiss shamanism as psychopathological, charlatanism or trickery (Hubbard, 2003). It is noteworthy, however, that shamanism has remained an integral part of indigenous healing rituals since ancient times and is currently attracting increasing interest as a complementary therapeutic technique in the disciplines of psychology and medicine (Bittman et al., 2001).

Shamanism may be defined as “a family of traditions whose practitioners focus on voluntarily entering altered states of consciousness in which they experience themselves, or their spirit(s), traveling to other realms at will and interacting with other entities in order to serve their community” (Walsh, 1989, p. 5). While no single definition will appeal to all scholars (Walsh, 1995), this one emphasizes several integral features of shamanism. First, it describes shamanism as a set of techniques (e.g., listening to monotonous drumming) designed to facilitate purported alterations in consciousness (see Krippner, 2002), rather than a religious tradition (e.g., Eliade, 1964). Second, the definition highlights the volitional control of the practitioner; that is, the shaman’s ability to enter and exit altered states of consciousness (ASCs) at will and limited mastery with regards to the phenomenological

content of the ASCs. Third, the definition’s reference to the practitioner’s spirit “traveling to other realms” (Walsh, 1989, p. 5) underscores the commonly accepted view (e.g., Heinze, 1991; Ripinsky-Naxon, 1993) that an ASC referred to as “ecstatic journeying” or simply “shamanic journeying” (i.e., out-of-body experiences or soul flight) constitutes a core aspect of shamanism (Krippner, 2002). Finally, the practitioner’s commitment to serve the interests of the community highlights the social-role function of shamanism (see, for example, Noll, 1983; Wright, 1989). We note, however, that other definitions (see, for example, Rock & Krippner, 2011, p. 40) represent attempts to operationalize the term shamanism by avoiding “key” definitional elements (e.g., “spirits”) that may be deemed “social constructs” and/or “hypothetical constructs.”

In the current historical moment, the field of shamanic studies is scattered across numerous academic disciplines including anthropology, psychology, and cognitive science. In 2010 at the 17th International Transpersonal Conference in Moscow, the distinguished psychologist Stanley Krippner proposed that a future generation of academics might witness the fragmented field of shamanic studies coalesce into a unified discipline that might be referred to as *shamanology*.

Winkelman

Despite the resurgence of interest in shamanism, concepts such as shaman, shamanism, and shamanic states of consciousness are neither well defined nor sufficiently understood (Rock & Krippner, 2007, 2008a). A case in point is the relationship between shamanism and mediumship. In the first article in this special topic issue, *Shamanism in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Michael Winkelman aims to distinguish shamans from other magico-religious practitioners (e.g., mediums). This is an interesting objective in light of Peters and Price-Williams' (1980) contention that in over half of 21 cultures where shamans engage in journeying, they also function as mediums. Presumably, part of the ambiguity regarding shamanic versus mediumistic roles is due to the belief that both shamans and mediums communicate with spirits located in *non-physical worlds* (NPWs) that are attributed an *exosomatic ontological status* (i.e., the NPWs are deemed to exist independently of the percipient's mind-body complex; for an examination of the notion of exosomatic shamanic NPWs, see Rock & Krippner, 2008b).

Winkelman also examines the neuropsychological basis of shamanic ASCs. It is important to note that a neuropsychological approach to consciousness, and thus ASCs, is not necessarily reductionistic (e.g., physiologically reductionism, biochemical reductionism; see, for example, Chalmers, 2004; Hasegawa & Jamieson, 2002), and thus may be usefully applied within the field of transpersonal studies. One should, however, be mindful that there is controversy regarding whether shamanic states are ASCs in the sense in which, for instance, Tart (e.g., 1969), Singer (1977), and Pekala (e.g., 1991) have invoked the term or whether it may be more accurate to refer to shamanic states as *modified attentional states* (see, for example, Krippner, 2002). We further note that it has been argued (e.g., Rock & Krippner, 2007) that within the field of shamanic studies, consciousness is often confused with phenomenological content, thus, it might be more appropriate to speak of *shamanic states of phenomenology* rather than shamanic states of consciousness.

Kremer

In his article, *Postmodern Trickster Strands in Shamanic Worlds*, Jürgen Werner Kremer examines the shaman as *trickster* through the lenses of postmodernism. As previously stated, orthodox science has applied the term *trickster* to shamanism in a derogatory manner.

However, other appraisals of the shaman as *trickster* are characterized by admiration and respect:

Shamans operate on the *limens*, or borders, of both society and consciousness, eluding structures and crossing established boundaries. They are in some aspects related to the *trickster* figure described in the literature (e.g., Hansen, 2001, p. 27). As liminal practitioners, they often use deception and sleight-of-hand when they feel that such practices are needed. Thus, shamans can be both cultural heroes and social hoaxsters. . . . Like other *tricksters*, however, they are capable of reconciling opposites; they justify their adroit maneuvering and use of *legerdemain* in the cause of promoting individual and community health and well-being (pp. 30–31). (Rock & Krippner, 2011, p. 14).

Indeed, it is clear that Kremer's analysis in this special topic issue is in no sense one that belittles shamans or their contributions.

The liminal nature of the shaman is underscored by crossing boundaries during journeys between the terrestrial world and various NPWs (Rock & Krippner, 2011). Here, one is reminded of the contention that "the collision and superimposition of different ontological worlds is a major characteristic of postmodern art" (Harvey, 1990, p. 51). Thus, one begins to cultivate a sense of the relationship between the shaman and the postmodern sensibility which might be characterized by, for instance, a fractured mode of time and space, distrust of grand or master narratives (e.g., science), and absence of a fixed historical reference point (Foster, 1985).

Krippner

Historically, one of the primary reasons that a shaman would journey was to heal community members (e.g., Krippner, 1987) or engage in self-healing (e.g., Achterberg, 1987; Harner, 1990). Interestingly, Harner (1988) has modified traditional shamanic induction methods to create a therapeutic modality referred to as "Harner Method Shamanic Counselling," whereby a person who may be bereft of any prior knowledge of shamanic cosmologies and technologies enters a client-therapist relationship in order to "become his or her own shaman" (Harner, 1988, p. 179) and obtain self-healing or insight.

In his article, *Shamans as Healers, Counselors, and Psychotherapists*, Stanley Krippner examines the healing potential of shamanism. More specifically, Krippner focuses on the importance of a shared world-

view between the client and shaman (e.g., the same supernatural concepts) that serves to render meaningful the diagnostic process. In addition, the shaman's personal qualities (e.g., self-control) that facilitate the client's healing, the importance of positive client expectancy (e.g., placebo effects), and the client's sense of mastery that precipitates empowerment and healing, are examined. Given recent research (e.g., Rock, 2009), which has demonstrated a link between shamanic-like practices and reductions in mood disturbance (e.g., depression-dejection, tension-anxiety), it would be prudent for clinicians to be cognizant of shamanic principles and practices.

Harner

Michael Harner is an anthropologist and shaman who is generally considered responsible for re-introducing shamanism to the West. Harner's books, *The Way of the Shaman* and *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, are considered classics in the field of shamanic studies. In 1987, Harner created the Foundation of Shamanic Studies, which continues to provide worldwide training in shamanic techniques.

In this interview (My Path in Shamanism), Michael Harner sketches his trajectory from arriving at the University of California at Berkeley (1950), to conducting doctoral research among the Jívaro people in eastern Ecuador (1956-1957), to his retirement from academia to focus exclusively on shamanism (1987). Harner also employs his conceptual and experiential knowledge of shamanism to answer questions concerning, for instance, the use of psychoactive plants, sorcery, "spirits," and cosmic knowledge. This interview constitutes an invaluable resource for anyone interested in shamanism.

Rock and Storm

There is a long-standing link in the anthropological literature between shamanism and *psi* (Storm & Rock, 2011). Parapsychologists use the term *psi* to refer to *anomalous cognitions* or *extra-sensory perceptions* (ESP; e.g., telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition) and *anomalous perturbations* or *psychokinesis* (commonly known as PK; Rock, Storm, Irwin, & Beischel, in press). From Grof's (1975, 1988, 1993) perspective, many transpersonal experiences are *psi* experiences. For example, one of Grof's transpersonal categories is phenomena that take place within consensual space-time reality (i.e., our physical universe) but transcend its normal boundaries (i.e., spatial and temporal expansion and contraction). Precognition

and retro-cognition are *psi* phenomena characterized by the transcendence of "normal" temporal boundaries by allowing one to perceive future events and past events, respectively. However, in Daniels' (2005) view, a *psi* experience is only transpersonal "if the effect of this experience is in some way to transform the person's sense of self to encompass a wider or deeper reality" (pp. 49-50).

In this article, Shamanism, Imagery Cultivation, and Psi-Signal Detection: A Theoretical Model, Experimental Protocol and Preliminary Data, Adam J. Rock and Lance Storm present their *imagery cultivation* (IC) model based on shamanic-like principles and ostensibly *psi*-conductive shamanic-like practices. The authors note that the IC model has received preliminary empirical support and suggest that, in the future, the IC model may represent a significant challenge to the dominant paradigm in parapsychology: the noise-reduction model.

Walsh

In the final article of this special topic issue, Experiences of "Soul Journeys" in the World's Religions: The Journeys of Mohammed, Saints Paul and John, Jewish Chariot Mysticism, Taoism's Highest Clarity School, and Shamanism, Roger N. Walsh focuses on a core feature of shamanism that is alternatively referred to as ecstatic journeying, soul flight, shamanic journeying, or soul journeying (Krippner, 2002). In journeying states, the shaman's sense of self is typically experienced as a "soul" distinct from the physical body (Walsh, 1995). Walsh also examines journeying experiences in other world religions including Taoism and Jewish mysticism. Importantly, Walsh examines the ontological status of the NPWs to which shamans, and other practitioners, journey. Ontology may be defined as "the matter of what there is in the world" (Chalmers, 1996, p. 41); it is concerned with "an overall conception of how things are" (Heil, 1998, p. 6). For example, an ontologist might be concerned with whether the kind of thing that a shamanic journeying image is referentially linked to is *imaginal* (e.g., derived from material stored in one's long-term memory system) or *exosomatic* (Walsh, 1990). Walsh argued that "[a]s metaphysicians, shamans tend to be realists," (p. 89) in the sense that the content of journeying imagery is conceptualized as real, objective, and independent of the perceiver's mind-body state(s).

Concluding Remarks

It is my view that further investigation of shamanism is essential for understanding the nature of consciousness, human potentials, and indeed the human

species' survival in the face of current ecological crises. In the meantime, "It is crucial to learn what shamanism has to offer the social and behavioral sciences before archival research in libraries replaces field research as the best available method for investigating these prototypical psychologists" (Rock & Krippner, 2011, p. xii). Thus, it is hoped that the series of articles in this timely special topic issue will inspire future research in the emerging field of shamanology.

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