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Assessing the Effectiveness of Core-Shamanism on a Group of Westerners: A Brief Research Report

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A study was conducted on Western adults who participated in a group undergoing initiation into therapeutic shamanism. It investigated how shamanic work could be a factor triggering changes in persons who never had been previously immersed in such a tradition. Five groups, each composed of six people for a total of 30 participants, met eight times over a period of four months. Analyzing questions asked of the 27 who completed the program resulted in the following identified themes: experiences of the group, trust in the shamanic practitioner, raised awareness of their feeling states, experiences of the shamanic journeys, understanding of the origin of personal difficulties, solutions discovered to improve one's life, identification of striking moments, belief in the existence of "spirits," and other relevant changes like disappearance of allergies, improved self-confidence, more assertiveness, a desire to live, optimism, the capacity to live in the present moment and to make choices. The structural role of ritual and trance in this type of program is highlighted, including discussion about implications of the changes reported.

Keywords: *core-shamanism, psychotherapy, trance, ritual*

In recent years, there seems to have been a growing interest in shamanic practices by Westerners. Many media reports, articles, and books on this subject have encouraged Western people to undertake initiation into shamanism or to consult shamans (Harner, 2013). They seem to be seeking both therapeutic efficacy that they have not experienced with conventional medicine and a spiritual answer to their woes. Feeling uprooted from nature, people see shamanism as a traditional practice that can reduce the gap that modernity has established between man and the natural environment (Abram, 2011).

However, there have been few studies examining the impact of training in shamanic practices. One example of such a study examined training in a specific shamanic practice (Matrenitsky & Friedman, 2012), but there is a need for more such studies. It is from this perspective that we sought

to evaluate the therapeutic relevance of practicing shamanism with a group of Westerners. The present article focuses on this experiment conducted with 30 participants. After a brief presentation of shamanism (and more particularly of *Core Shamanism*, Harner, 2013), its cosmology and its vision of disease, we describe the methodology used and the content of this shamanic therapeutic program. The results are then analyzed by considering the question of therapeutic influence and the place of ritual in triggering change.

Presentation of Core-Shamanism

Harner (1990, 2013), who was an anthropologist, set up the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (FSS), and he was considered an authority on shamanism from an emic perspective. After studying and experiencing many shamanic initiations on different continents, Harner found many points of convergence within shamanic practices, regardless of

culture or place. It also appeared to him that shamans on the five continents have a relatively similar perception of reality, including the origin of diseases and their care. These invariants constitute what Harner (2013) called *Core Shamanism*, which constitutes a nucleus of shamanic practices across cultural contexts. Fifty years of study of this practice enabled him to build a solid understanding of both traditional healing practices and the spiritual origin of ills.

The term shaman is of Siberian origin. Proposed by Russian anthropologists, it initially described the healers of the Tungus people (the Evenks). In its restricted definition, the shaman is a person who enters into a *shamanic state of consciousness* (SSC; Harner, 2013), most often aided by a drum, until exhaustion and loss of consciousness. The practice of trance is important and makes the shaman an expert of modified states of consciousness. In keeping with an animist vision, shamanic peoples consider that everything that exists within our reality is spirit within the non-ordinary reality.

Study

Due to the apparent interest of Westerners in traditional and indigenous medicine, the objective of this study was to evaluate the therapeutic relevance of a group shamanic initiation-type framework. The aim was to study how each person can incorporate a Western shamanic practice (Harner, 2013) into his or her life and to observe its possible therapeutic aspect. Our personal observations (Masson & Bernoussi, 2014) led us to think that shamanic care often contributes to the disappearance of the “ill” giving rise to the demand for care, and above all, also essentially confers on the person a feeling of confidence, strength, and energy to help him or her make decisions and act otherwise. This aspect is often the basis of future changes and a marked improvement with regard to mental suffering. Following these first observations, we sought to estimate the relevance of proposing a shamanic framework to Westerners with a therapeutic intention or in an effort to improve their quality of life. Several reasons prompted us to set up this project:

- To evaluate the usefulness/interest of this type of traditional framework with Westerners.
- To take into account the frequent presence of existential and metaphysical issues in many patients, causing suffering that cannot be addressed by standard psychotherapy.
- To meet patients from different cultures where the question of “invisible worlds” is sensitive.
- To include patients who have already followed other psychotherapies without real improvement.

Participants

Over a two-year period, five groups of 6 participants were enrolled in groups undergoing initiation into therapeutic shamanism, for a total of 30 participants. Three participants abandoned their groups before the end of the program. The characteristics of the participants are: 27 nonpsychotic participants (19 women aged 30 to 57 with a mean age of 41 years and 6 months; and 8 men aged 22 to 50 with a mean age of 30 years and 6 months). The recruiting of subjects was carried out through advertisements placed on various websites and by word of mouth. The inclusion criteria were the absence of psychiatric disorders and being over the age of majority. Their original religion or socio-professional category did not matter.

Procedure

Each participant was invited to complete a questionnaire before beginning the cycle entitled Shamanic Psychotherapy Group (SPG). This questionnaire was sent by e-mail accompanied by a Word file to complete and return before the beginning of the sessions.

Each group met 8 times, generally Thursday night, over a period of 4 months. The sessions were conducted by one of the authors (Joanic Masson), initiated within the Foundation for Shamanic Studies for five years. Each session lasted for about 2 hours, and was constructed in a ritualized way:

- The group formed a circle with a candle and white sage in the center.
- Opening ritual: lighting the candle and a wisp of sage.

- Drum or rattle
- Debriefing on what has happened since the last session
- Shamanic practices with explanations and exchanges (The exact program of practices is presented in appendix)
- Proposed exercises to do at home
- Closing ritual

At the first session, a CD was given to each participant. It contained two drum sessions of about 20 minutes to allow practice at home for those who did not have a drum or a rattle. The SPG program was designed to facilitate in a gradual way: the development of shamanic consciousness (SCC) to the sound of the drum or the rattle, and the shamanic journey in the lower world as well as the the upper world to meet his or her “allied spirits” and to learn how to communicate with them. Afterwards, shamanic journeys known as *initiatory* were proposed, for example around symbolic death. The general guideline was to experiment and build one’s own beliefs about shamanism. The explanations and practices proposed are part of the work of Harner (2013) called Basic Shamism, and are designed not draw upon any dogmatic belief system. All participants thus construct their representations of the framework and of what they can expect from it, thus creating their own cosmologies.

Two months after the last session, a new questionnaire was sent by e-mail. The participants were invited to complete it and return it to us. The questions posed are listed in the appendix.

Results

The results described below, obtained through qualitative thematic analysis, only take into account the feedback from the 27 participants who completed the full SPG cycle.

Experiencing the cycle and the group. The meetings were described as warm and intense with feelings that are sometimes confusing because of the awakening and unexpected experiences encountered during the shamanic journeys. All participants described the experience as reassuring in a secure framework with a group that facilitated exchanges. Among the participants, two expressed a frustration related to difficulties in practicing the shamanic

journey. One other participant regretted that the ritual was not that elaborated and sacred for him.

Trust in the shamanic practitioner. They all confirmed the need to trust the practitioner to “let themselves go” while feeling safe. A secure and trustworthy framework appeared to be the prerequisites for the occurrence of changes.

Raising awareness. Few participants claimed to have learned nothing about themselves during the SPG ($n = 2$). Participants evoked the need to be no longer afraid of learning to receive, to let go and to accept themselves with their qualities and weaknesses. They also emphasized the importance of prioritizing what is important in life. Self-fulfillment appeared as a necessity, along with the imperative of facing things that hurt one’s inner self, most often felt by suffering. Raising awareness of traumatic memories is also frequently evoked.

Experiencing the shamanic journeys. Journeys were described as dreams, moments of plenitude, freedom, “exceptional moments,” and “sacred moments.” Frequently, shamanic journeys are surprising in their unexpected content, leading to “striking discoveries” that are understood much later only. Some journeys are painful because of the awareness they induced, but most often led to solutions or resolutions of what was previously a problem.

Understanding the origin of personal difficulties. Access to often forgotten memories helped in bringing sense and understanding of painful emotions and problematic behaviors. Some participants expressed the capacity to step back and to have better hindsight from these memories. Others talked about the disappearance of the suffering attached to these memories. Participants described the origin of their ills as: painful past memories; the need to control everything; the need to feel that they exist; as well as the presence of various inhibitions. The solutions perceived during these journeys included: the need to revisit their history; to gain self-confidence and personal resources; and the need to let go.

Other changes observed. A decrease in daily suffering was reported, including the disappearance of allergies, improved self-confidence, more assertiveness, a desire to live, optimism, the capacity to live in the present moment and

to make choices. Acceptance of body image and better synchronization was also described. For 21 participants, positive changes were also observed in their close circle of family and friends.

Solutions to improve one's life. The most important thing reported was increased confidence in oneself and in one's resources, as well as confidence in the unconditional support of the "allied spirits." There was also a feeling of security that encouraged a more spiritual and simple life, with the need to take care of ourselves, our loved ones and put life events into perspective. The feeling of internal security is also greatly increased

Striking moments of the SPG. The two most striking moments that emerged most frequently were the encounter with the "allied spirits" and certain shamanistic journeys ("encountering his or her greatest fear," "meeting his or her soul"). Thus, one participant, for example, described her shamanic journeys as follows: "I love this moment when I run to the world from below to meet him. He is always there. Our flights together are such fantastic moments!"

Belief in the existence of "spirits." All participants, even those who have had difficulty in practicing, were convinced of the existence of "allied spirits" following this experiment. It is certainly this which contributed to the positive effect of the initiation. As Urban (Personal communication, October 28th 2015), President of FSS Europe and shaman, explained, it is the relationship with the spirits that is sacred in shamanism.

Discussion

Considering the results observed, the potential usefulness of group shamanic sessions seems justified. The proposed framework consisting of praxis (gestures, movements, attitudes, know-how), aimed at an effective transformation of the individual through specific codified procedural constraints, seems promising. The participants implicitly attributed to the shaman an apostolic function (Palazzolo, 2009) in the sense that they believed in the therapeutic scope of the given care/framework, and that they adhered to it in order to banish the "impure" and to recover wellness. This ritual practice is also codified as a technology that frames a practice of trance. The latter is indeed a

strong traditional act which can trigger a profound change. Trance testifies a psycho-biological plasticity in the sense that the usual functioning of the person is liable to be modified in certain circumstances to adopt a new organization. The participant is thus involved in a ritual where s/he is going to imbue the symbolic universe which constitutes the background of the device. The shamanic ceremony ensures, in a way, a communication between man and nature, between the man who is often uprooted, separated from his or her animal part which in fact may constitute his or her essence. The person is therefore invited to give himself or herself up to the experience in order to make this transformative passage. He or she is invited to surrender to the work of the spirits, and the shaman acts as a representative and an intermediary. The participants are invited to let go. Abandoning himself or herself to the experience while hoping for an improvement in his or her ills, implies abandoning the struggle. The participant must abandon any struggle against himself or herself by stopping all the strategies in place to date to get better. In the way, it is posited that these strategies usually only maintain the suffering. This abandonment of the self can be facilitated by ceremony, by the abolition of speech, as well as allowing a space for the release of self-control in order to let go.

Finally, intentionality plays an essential role in triggering change. Participants, including the shamanic practitioner, participate in a common dynamic, that of a transformative change. The question of trust is here posed as a watermark. For any therapy (whatever its form), to claim to be effective, the shaman must trust the proposed framework in order to bring the participants in turn to have faith in him or her as well as in the framework (Nathan, 2006). There is also a need for consensus around the technique. The device must be recognized. It must exist in specialized and/or scientific journals and be practiced. Here, the present approach is recognized through its ancestral and traditional origins, which give it an operative value. Thus, being part of the world of those who have been initiated, even cured, forms an implicit but powerful therapeutic vector.

Thus, the trust in the healing process is based on the need to rely on the power of “spirits.” While in psychotherapy, confidence derives its strength from a region of the inner self that is otherwise inaccessible, shamanic practices invite us to rely on a force external to ourselves, namely that of the “invisible worlds,” enabling the potentialities of each one to be deployed (Daan van Kampenhout, 2001). The participant then allows himself or herself to be carried by these forces. This dynamic is most often implicit and aims at the construction of a new reality for the participant or even the modification of his or her identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion to this study, participation in a shamanic group appears to be able to trigger constructive therapeutic changes: raising awareness of emotions, understanding of the origin of personal difficulties, solutions discovered to improve one’s life, identification of striking moments, and other relevant changes like disappearance of allergies, improved self-confidence, more assertiveness, a desire to live, optimism, the capacity to live in the present moment and to make choices. On the one hand, we have observed the importance of a safe group where confidence in the framework and the shamanic practitioner play an essential role in letting go. On the other hand, we observe that “working with the spirits” has allowed the participants to feel a sense of self-confidence and of a sustainable life. Confidence in the unconditional support of allied spirits fosters this ability to change one’s life, to hope for a more positive future and to give a sense of strength to help on a daily basis. Finally, the analysis reveals a feeling of freedom among the participants, a sensation conducive to feeling more coherent with their aspirations and desires. However, it should be noted that the results obtained from this study are not intended to give any “award of excellence” to the exclusivity of the shamanic treatment of psychological ills, but allow us to show other possible fields related to the spectrum of therapeutic frameworks that the patient can use in his or her care path. The aim here has been to advocate that care be diversified to promote complementary and

integrative approaches, rather than embracing any dogma that would enclose the patient in an almost unitary vision, often privileging only the so-called conventional medical practices. The field of clinical practice from which this study emanates has repeatedly highlighted the patient as being a subject with his or her own beliefs, considering his or her subjectivity as essential when seeking to give meaning to a difficulty or discomfort, whether it be explicitly expressed or not.

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Appendix

List of questions asked of participants during post-event qualitative interview:

- How did you experience shamanic meetings? What did you think of them?
- How did you feel about the group?
- What did you think of the setting, the atmosphere?
- Did you trust it?
- Did you learn about yourself during this group?
- How do you experience shamanic travel?
- Have you understood the origin of some of the difficulties you encounter in your life?
- What do you think of this awareness?
- Do you see changes in your life? Which ones?
- Has anyone noticed anything about your changes? Which ones?
- Do you have solutions to improve your life?
- Do you feel more able to live your life? (better control, etc.)
- Which element has had the greatest impact on you in this initiation?
- Does this initiation correspond to what you had imagined?
- Do you believe in the world of spirits?
- Are you satisfied?

Format of Shamanic Psychotherapy Group meetings:

Meeting 1

Opening ritual

Presentation of the group, the framework, its confidentiality, presentation of each participant

Presentation of what shamanism is

Shamanic cosmology

Allied Spirits: Power Animal, Guide, etc.

What is a shamanic journey?

Exercise 1: Listening to the drum and experiencing the state of shamanic consciousness (SSC)

Exercise 2: Shamanic journey into the world from below, encounter with the "power animals" or "animal totems"

Discussion and exercises proposed to be done at

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home (shamanic journey in the world from below and exploration of it)

Closing ritual

Meeting 2

Opening ritual, drum

Debriefing

Unify with his/her power animal to gain strength

Exercise 3: Shamanic journey into the world from below and fusion with his/her power animal

Exercise 4: Unite with a tree (tree dance)

Exercise 5: A shamanic journey into the world from below and asks his/her animal to help obtaining what he/she needs in life to flourish

Discussion and exercises proposed at home

(exploring the world from below with its power animal, determining an existential question)

Closing ritual

Meeting 3

Opening ritual, tree dance

Debriefing

Unite with his/her power animal in the middle world to gain strength and protect himself

Exercise 6: Unite with his/her power animal in the "middle world"

Exercise 7: Journey into the world from below and ask your animal to guide you to a "place of strength"

Exercise 8: Journey into the world from above, meeting with his/her guide. Ask him/her the existential question

Discussion and exercises proposed to be done at home (to explore the world from below with his/her animal of power, unite with his/her animal of power in the "middle world")

Closing ritual

Meeting 4

Opening ritual

Debriefing

Exercise 9: Unite with his/her power animal in the middle world

Exercise 10: Journey into the world from below and ask his/her animal to guide him/her towards his/her obscure part

Exercise 11: Journey into the world from below and

cleanse the dark part in the place of strength
Exercise 12: Meet with an ancestor to learn important elements about his or her family history.
Discussion and exercises proposed to be done at home (to explore the world from below with his/her animal of power, to unite with his/her animal of power in the middle world, use a rattle)
Closing ritual

Meeting 5

Opening ritual
Debriefing
Advices to shamanize: importance of the ritual, of the frame
Exercise 13: Journey into the world from above and ask the guide for a cure of his/her shadow
Exercise 14: Journey into the world from above and ask the guide a rhythm of a rattle to call him/her
Exercise 15: Call the guide while playing the rattle
Discussion and exercises proposed at home (exploring the world from above with the guide, unite with his/her guide in the middle world using the rattle)
Closing ritual

Meeting 6

Opening ritual
Debriefing
The spirits of the elements
Exercise 16: Unite with his/her guide in the middle world using the rattle
Call from the 6 directions: principles and functions.
Dismemberment, death and rebirth. Symbolic aspects
Exercise 17: Journey of dismemberment
Discussion and exercises proposed at home (unite with his/her guide in the middle world using the rattle)
Closing ritual

Meeting 7

Opening ritual, unite with his/her guide in the middle world using the rattle
Debriefing

Exercise 18: Meet his/her greatest fear
Exercise 19: Restitution of part of soul
Dismemberment: personal experience of each
Discussion and exercises proposed at home (shamanic journey, learning to communicate with his/her allied spirits)
Closing ritual

Meeting 8

Opening ritual, unite with his/her guide in the middle world using the rattle
Debriefing
Exercise 20: Journey to his/her soul. Ask him/her: "What do I need to be happy? "
Review of the cycle, various issues
Exercise 21: Travel to ask one of his/her allied minds how to work better with them
Discussion
Closing ritual

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