

**PSYCHIC HEALING AND WOMEN:
AN EXAMPLE FROM A SPIRITUALIST-METAPHYSICAL CHURCH**

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ABSTRACT: Ten million Americans are involved in some way with psychic healing practices, yet biomedicine often neglects or ignores these alternative health care systems. This study describes a contemporary example of psychic healing among middle-class white women as observed in a southwestern Spiritualist-metaphysical chapel. This work is placed in both historical and contemporary contexts. Alternative healing choices, specifically psychic-spiritual healing, may affect the autonomy and self-empowerment of women.

INTRODUCTION

"Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, said, 'In order to cure the human body it is necessary to have a knowledge of the whole of things'" (Wise 1942:9).

"In every age and on various levels of civilization religion has been associated, in one way or another, with health and the experience of illness" (Wise 1942:xi). Religion and medicine, two sociocultural fields that were once inseparable, have in modern times become dichotomized into the purportedly separate domains of "faith" and "reason" (Schriver 1980). In mainstream western society, biomedicine has become the dominant health system and has not generally acknowledged the persistence of health beliefs associated with different religious movements (e.g., Spiritualism, Unity School of Christianity, Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship). Yet non-mainstream religions in the genre of Spiritualism and metaphysics are often centered around the notions of health, illness, and "dis-ease"; therefore, these religious groups are an important arena for the anthropological study of health-related beliefs as a cultural and symbolic system in American society.

This paper describes a contemporary example of psychic healing among middle-class white women as observed in a southwestern Spiritualist-metaphysical chapel.¹ The chapel is primarily a liberal Christian church, but elements of non-western healing practices and philosophies (i.e., Eastern and Native American) are often incorporated into church teachings. This research is not only a contribution to the literature on the continued interface between religion and health, but it also augments research on women's health and the alternative practices in which they engage along with more mainstream biomedical health-seeking behaviors.

In order to place the details of the study into context, I first discuss the historical development of spiritualist churches in relation to religion, healing practices, and women's participation. I then present the specific "world view" of the chapel which revolves around the concept of healing, followed by an examination of women's position in this alternative healing system and the counter-hegemonic nature of healing at this particular chapel. I incorporate into the discussion some comparisons with the few other ethnographies on contemporary

¹ To preserve anonymity, I will not name the site of the study but will refer to it as the church or chapel.

spiritual-psychic healing in America (McGuire 1988; Wagner 1983). A theme throughout this paper is how alternative healing choices, such as psychic-spiritual healing, may affect the autonomy and self-empowerment of women.

Methodology

This study is based on semi-structured interviews² conducted with the eight core leaders and members of the chapel (five women and three men) over a four-month period. Additionally, over two years I engaged in participant observation and informal interaction with members of the chapel by attending the weekly psychic-spiritual development classes and Sunday night services, in addition to monthly dream workshops and "message nights" (a night where a person can receive psychic-spiritual guidance from church mediums; this is considered a fund raiser for the church and the fee is two dollars per message).

Total chapel membership is fluid and generally includes from twenty to thirty members, about 70% of whom are women, although this percentage varies. The socio-economic composition of the church group is lower-middle to middle-class, with a range of incomes (from unemployed to a family income of over \$50,000), educational levels (most with high school education and some with college education), and current employment (from legal secretary, mechanic, executive banker, to retired). The average age of members is around forty-five, with an age spread from eighteen to seventy-five.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SPIRITUALISM: RELIGION, BIOMEDICINE AND WOMEN IN THE 19th CENTURY

In the 19th century there was a florescence of religious and healing movements which--especially in the latter part of the 1800s--were interwoven with the politics of gender, professionalization and the increasing hegemony of scientific thought, including that of biomedicine (Ehrenreich and English 1978; Brumberg 1989). Religious movements and alternative healing strategies³ were a complex combination of accommodation and resistance to the dominant cultural milieu of scientific, rationalistic, and biomedical thought. Movements such as Spiritualism⁴ challenged the rationalistic, positivistic, and materialist approaches of the day, including the healing techniques of "regular" allopathic (i.e., biomedical) physicians.

² Some of the questions asked included: "How did you get involved with psychic-spiritual healing?"; "What do you think about seeking simultaneous health strategies such as psychic healing and biomedical healing by a physician?"; "Are more women involved in psychic-spiritual healing? Why do you think that is?"; "How is healing a part of your life?".

³ McGuire defines "alternative healing" as referring to "a wide range of beliefs and practices that adherents expect to affect health but that are not promulgated by medical personnel in the dominant biomedical system" (McGuire 1988: 3). Additionally, "much of alternative healing ... is not merely a technique, but rather entails an entire system of beliefs and practices" (McGuire 1988: 6). Psychic-spiritual healing fits squarely within these definitions of alternative healing.

⁴ Spiritualism has been defined as: "a significant and influential religious movement that held the promise of ultimate moral perfection through demonstration of the healing powers of the spirit world" (Brumberg 1989: 63); a "belief in communication with spirits through human mediums" (Moore 1977: xii); and as a "folk, home-centered movement" (Ellwood 1988: 60).

Indeed, at least three major 19th century religious movements (Spiritualism, Seventh-Day Adventism and Christian Science) "incorporated some basic challenge to medical authority" (Brumberg 1989:75). It is no coincidence that women were the primary leaders and supporters of these alternative movements for they were often the objects of biomedical manipulation and degradation (Ehrenreich and English 1978).

Officially, Spiritualism emerged as a movement in 1848 in Hydesville, New York, after two sisters, Maggie and Cathie Fox, were reported to have communication experiences with spirits (Brown 1970). The sisters created quite a sensation in having spirits knock or wrap on tables and walls in response to questions. They eventually traveled around the country and demonstrated their spiritual abilities. This incident inspired a florescence of psychic healers and mediums, most of whom were women.⁵ Female Spiritualist mediumship was in fact considered a fledgling new profession in the 1850s, although it never realized its goal of being a legitimate and acceptable occupation for women (Moore 1977). Attempts by female mediums to professionalize in the late 1800s met with much resistance from the biomedical and legal establishments: laws were passed outlawing "fortune-telling" and state medical standards were raised to put spiritualist healers out of business (Moore 1977).

Mediumship was considered by some to be a perversion of Victorian femininity--not in terms of the nonrational and spiritual characteristics of their trade (indeed, these were seen as attributes of Victorian women), but because of the adoption of male personae in trance states⁶ and the purported sexual licentiousness of female psychics.⁷ "Spiritualists themselves, while they rejected the notion that mediumship involved any corruption of womanly qualities, at least agreed with the critics that mediumship was an occupation especially suited for women" (Moore 1977:105). Additionally, the notion of women as the "weaker" sex was reinforced by many female psychics for whom illness and disease were a prerequisite: to be less physically adept meant that one was closer to the spiritual realm (Brumberg 1989).

While some characteristics of female mediumship reinforced Victorian stereotypes of women as weak, nervous, and nonrational, other attributes indicated the resistance of women psychics to the cultural confines of 19th century femininity.

"The efforts of feminist leaders after the American Civil War to liberate women from 'the narrow limits of the domestic circle' received strong vocal support at nearly every spiritualist convention held in the latter part of the

⁵ The term "psychic" here refers to the ability to intuit or experience a "knowing" of phenomena in the spiritual or metaphysical plane.

⁶ Some have argued that trance states function to provide "compensation for its hardest pressed members, most notably the women and children" in being able to act out forbidden social roles in a legitimized context (Moore 1977: 112; Gussler 1973).

⁷ "Spiritualism, it was charged time and again, promoted immorality by tolerating, even encouraging, divorce and remarriage"; the critics at the time viewed such behavior as "a free love movement" which was definitely considered beyond the realm of what was proper for a Victorian lady (Moore 1977: 117). Ironically, such a permissive attitude still exists among Spiritualists but times have changed so that ending relationships is no longer as stigma-laden for women as it was in the 19th century.

century. Women's rights was, in fact, the most popular cause of the spirits" (Moore 1977:116).

Yet, this by no means indicated a radical feminist stance espousing the overthrow of patriarchal hegemony.⁸ Rather, women were arguing for rights within the system as it existed.

The structure of Spiritualist churches reinforced the liberation and empowerment of women, at least in the sphere of religion, by giving them leadership roles at the local as well as national level. Women were also allowed to deliver sermons from the pulpit, which was tantamount to heresy in some other religious institutions at the time. In addition to their preeminence as leaders in Spiritualist churches, women were respected for their contributions to spiritual knowledge and experience (Brumberg 1989).

Yet inroads that Spiritualist women made in their autonomy and personal empowerment were offset to some extent by the efforts of members of the biomedical establishment who attempted to portray female spirituality as an indication of pathology. Mediumship was cast as a "functional disease of the nervous system" by George Beard, an influential late 19th century neurologist, and as a sign of psychopathology by G. Stanley Hall, a prominent psychologist (Moore 1977:127). There were dissenting views within the biomedical ranks, however, especially among eclectic physicians who hadn't yet wholly adopted the scientific medical ideology which prevailed at the time.

Although Spiritualism was in part founded upon cultural resistance, it was concomitantly based on a scientific religious philosophy which hypothesized the existence of a set of "spiritual laws" which were a set of natural laws not yet discovered by science (Wagner 1983). "Insofar as spiritualism was the first popular movement in America to insist on empiricism as the exclusive foundation of religious thought, it was bound to be associated with many other movements that sought to copy its example" (Moore 1977:235).

One of these movements closely associated with Spiritualism, and one that was also gaining momentum in the mid-19th century, was the American metaphysics movement,⁹ which postulated that healing was based upon tapping a universal power that each person is able to draw upon with the proper guidance and faith (McGuire 1988). Metaphysics is also considered a practical religious philosophy, and most students of metaphysics are interested in the confluence between everyday life and spiritual phenomena (Wagner 1983:4).

For metaphysicians, "truth" is to be sought in a quasi-empirical method wherein

⁸ Brumberg notes a similar phenomenon of "religious feminism," as distinct from "political feminism," in the American evangelical movement in her book Mission for Life (1984).

⁹ Metaphysics, as defined by turn-of-the-century groups, "refers to 'the deeper realities of the universe, the things that are external, standing above and beyond the outer phenomenal realm'" (McGuire 1988: 79). Metaphysical groups include Christian Science, Unity School of Christianity, Religious Science (McGuire 1988), and Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship (Wagner 1983). The chapel that I studied calls itself a "Spiritualist-metaphysical chapel" and thus incorporates ideologies from each movement.

personal experience becomes the proving ground; the metaphysical student is supposed to be skeptical of hypotheses until personally proven or disproven (Wagner 1983:177). At the same time, the metaphysician's

"response to the rationality of modern American culture is largely to provide an emphasis on the 'spiritual' as opposed to the 'material.' The 'God within' through which metaphysical students achieve self-realization, and thereby establish their identity, is a spiritual symbol, the existence of which cannot be verified by [traditional] logical or empirical procedures ... [yet] the metaphysical epistemology, based on personal experience as the criterion of truth, is viewed as scientific" (Wagner 1983:179).

Through this combination of science and religion, metaphysicians display a form of gnosis which is unusual in American culture; the concern with science is not surprising however, as positivism has been a pervasive ideology in America for at least the last century. Ellwood (1988:120) refers to this syncretism between the rational (scientific) and the nonrational (metaphysical/spiritual) as an example of a "technological myth" -- "a shamanism rationalized and justified by modern physical research". In summary, then, the Spiritual-metaphysical religious and healing movement seems to have been a complex mixture of resistance and accommodation to 19th-century American culture, a trend which continues today in Spiritualist-metaphysical groups.

An appropriate theory to introduce at this juncture is the Gramscian notion of hegemony and counter-hegemony. This theory provides a framework to understand the syncretic nature of the formative Spiritual-metaphysical movement of the 19th century in contradistinction to the increasingly hegemonic institution of biomedicine. Gramsci (1971) discusses society in terms of the tensions between hegemonic, or dominant, powers and counter-hegemonic forces that challenge this power. There is no simplistic either/or stance in this scheme, for there are, in fact, many positions on a continuum between hegemony and counter-hegemony. Thus, this theory provides a rather pluralistic view of contestations of power in society where "there is never any one, single, unified and coherent 'dominant ideology' which pervades everything" (Hall 1986:22).

By employing this framework, we can begin to conceptualize the emerging alternative healing and religious movements in the 19th century as taking a partially counter-hegemonic stance to the dominant materialistic, rationalistic, and biomedical cultural forces. Likewise, we must view biomedicine not as an all-encompassing monolithic force exerting a totalizing hegemony, but as a powerful hegemonic force which exerted variable control over alternative or "irregular" health movements. A substantiation of the incomplete nature of biomedicine's hegemony is the persistence of Spiritual-metaphysical healing alternatives more than 140 years after their emergence. The nature of one such contemporary alternative healing chapel is the subject to which we now turn.

HEALING: THE NEXUS OF A SPIRITUALIST-METAPHYSICAL BELIEF SYSTEM

The beliefs and behaviors associated with healing at the chapel under consideration in this paper can be referred to as a "health care system." Kleinman (1980:24) discusses

health care systems as cultural systems, or systems "of symbolic meanings anchored in particular arrangements of social institutions and patterns of interpersonal interactions". The articulation of healing and religion in Spiritualist churches can be discerned by comparing Kleinman's discussion of health care systems with Geertz's (1966:91) definition of religion: "a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [and women], by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence, and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic".

It is apparent that the confluence between religion and healing is not merely fortuitous: it is forged through the symbolic power of both religion and health care systems to provide us with a deeper understanding of our bodies (in the physical and mental sense) and our existence (in the spiritual and metaphysical sense). In essence, we can see how "religion is intrinsically related to other aspects of human life" (Moseley 1981:163), including health practices and beliefs.

McGuire (1988:5) notes that "Most adherents [to alternative religious healing groups] were initially attracted by the larger system of beliefs, of which health-illness related beliefs were only one part". At the Spiritualist-metaphysical church I attended, healing is the central tenet of a larger belief system which provides members with a framework that gives meaning and order to their lives. "This is our foundation: our philosophy is healing and healing is basically being healthy and happy" [pastor of the church].¹⁰ Health is viewed holistically: Health is balance, wholeness, prosperity, responsibility, and a recognition of the "divine order" within each of us. The pastor describes divine order as "your physical, mental, and spiritual, moving in a harmonious manner for happiness, health, and wealth."

Sunday night services, development classes, and psychic messages are all based upon the notion of healing all aspects of one's "three-fold-being" -- the physical, mental, and spiritual selves. The focus on healing in these three realms is not an abstract principle pertaining to metaphysics; rather, it is a set of beliefs that serve to guide members in their everyday lives of being workers, spouses, and parents. Common topics of development classes include love, relationships, employment, prosperity, and finding fulfillment in life.

One of the older ministers who is at the chapel periodically (he lives in another state now but returns for some chapel functions) stresses the importance of using spirituality in the everyday physical world:

"Spiritual sometimes means getting out of the muck of being human, but we live in a physical world -- we are physical. Channels [spirits], yes, they remember how it was to be human ... Use the spiritual truths in the physical world ... it's really about helping people -- that's putting spirituality into action."

When asked to describe the healing at the chapel, a female minister responded:

¹⁰ The current pastor, who is a man, has been in this role since 1977. The chapel was, however, founded by a women in El Paso, Texas, in the late 1950s, and was later moved to its current location.

"The kind of healing we do -- it's everything -- this chapel is a Spiritualist-metaphysical church, and so we are working on the metaphysical plane, we're definitely calling it spiritual healing. Most of the time we call it hands-on healing, but that really is up in the air because if you don't lay your hands on someone technically it's not hands-on healing, and sometimes I don't touch the person, sometimes I'll put my hand on them initially to get a grounding, but most of the time I'm working with their auras so I do aura healing."

A healer at the church may help a person facilitate the healing of a condition or the realization of divine order by conducting "hands-on healing." However, the primary focus at the chapel is on self-healing and taking responsibility for one's own health. Spiritual-metaphysical principles are taught in the weekly classes to help members attune themselves to their own intuition and psychic resources in realizing health and wellness.

In order to realize a state of healthiness, metaphysical principles suggest that one must acknowledge the existence of conflicting elements in one's life and work on changing mental attitudes, because:

"what was physical was first mental and therefore you can bring about healing by changing your mental attitude and again we stress the three-fold being which means that your actions have to go along with that. Whatever you're doing in your world there are probably things you need to change, the people you are around, the places you go, the things that you do ... so we try to be holistic in that sense with it, and that's what most of the holistic centers around her are doing too. They work with healing from many angles" [female minister who teaches classes at the chapel].

Illness, or "dis-ease," can have various etiologies, but it is often caused through a loss of balance in a person's life or through conflict: "The biggest problem we have in our health is that our mental and our physical are in conflict with each other" [pastor]. When thoughts and actions are out of balance, there is a "festering" which "eventually comes up as a disease." This is not necessarily a negative occurrence, because often when illness manifests, "what you're doing is surfacing things and saying goodbye to whatever you're feeling that's adverse" [pastor]. The experience of illness can, therefore, be considered as some life problem that has been dealt with and released. Dis-ease can also signal a conflict that needs to be addressed to achieve wellness again.

One of the female ministers, who refers to herself as a "metaphysician," related the following story, which exemplifies the notion of illness as a manifestation of a condition which is leaving the body and the biomedical ignorance of this phenomenon:

"When you see people go to the physical doctor and they do all kinds of tests and the person without a doubt has symptoms -- they are going through this excruciating condition -- and they go through these tests and there's no results. I'll never forget when I was back visiting [home] -- my grandma toted me up there because one of my great aunts was in the hospital, they couldn't find out what was wrong with her, so I'm standing there when the guy comes in to take blood again and I took a hold of my aunt's hand, she didn't know

anything about that I was in this [spiritual-metaphysical healing], and I put out the clear strong thought that this test would show, this particular test would show what the cause was, what the condition was. That test came back that there was absolutely nothing wrong with her. Now when that kind of thing happens it tells you that a condition is leaving you, and that doesn't make sense to a physical world, but if you start to recognize that and work with it, you'll find that it's really true. That's why people will go through five of the same exact physical tests and have five different results, because the condition is changing as it is leaving -- it's not there, it doesn't exist there physically anymore; yes, the symptoms are there but that the symptoms of its leaving. The sad thing that happens is that sometimes people will get a prognosis or some kind of diagnosis that they have a condition that actually left them and if they start reading up on that condition and buying into it that condition does get established and does come about and manifest."

Dis-ease can also result from interactions with elements in the environment which cause stress (i.e., people, situations, relationships). Allergies, for example, can be the manifestation of internal or external irritants in one's life. The pastor of the chapel, who has allergies occasionally, is thankful every time he sneezes, because he is that much closer to eliminating the irritation. Sore throats are another commonly discussed condition that may manifest when a person is experiencing power or communication difficulties. The throat is believed to be the communication or power *chakra* (energy center); therefore, conditions that materialize in this area are most likely related to difficulties in communication and frustrations involving a power struggle. It may be an inner power struggle, such as trying to overcome a maladaptive habit, or an external power struggle, as with a boss or friend. Additionally, someone may also take on a condition of a person with whom they identify. For example, if one's spouse is involved in a power struggle the condition may become manifest in the other partner.

As seen in the last example, the characteristics of the throat *chakra* indicate the symbolic nature of dis-ease conditions and how the health belief system of the chapel becomes embodied. Members utilize Spiritualist-metaphysical ideology to explain their discomfort; concomitantly, the very knowledge that communication problems may become manifest as a throat condition may actually produce the ailment if one is experiencing communication problems. Hence, a situation is created in which symbolic knowledge is literally embodied.

The use of symbols and rituals is paramount in facilitating healing and, more generally, the spiritual development process. Symbols are meaningful in the understanding of illness conditions, and rituals--combined with symbolism--provide an important vehicle for alleviating dis-ease. McGuire, in her study of ritual healing, notes that

"In everyday parlance, ritual connotes repetition of empty, meaningless forms, but this is far from the experience of those who participate in [alternative healing groups] ... ritual actions were typically genuine expressions of important group experiences and meanings, central parts of the healing process" (McGuire 1988:213).

According to one of the female healers at the chapel:

"what's important is not the ritual but the focus that we use to do it ... churches eons ago were probably very good with the spirituality and then they got very caught up with the ritual, not recognizing that the ritual was there to give focus. The ritual became the end-all to everything and that's where I think we got off a little bit."

Metaphysical Healing Techniques

Rituals and symbolism are particularly prominent in the wide variety of techniques that can be used to dispel illness, imbalance, and dis-ease. These methods include meditation, positive visualization, verbal affirmations, working with energy in the form of various colored lights, receiving "a healing" from one of the certified healers at the chapel, and consultations with spirit guides or teachers.

Individual and group meditations are a primary healing activity. While in a meditative state, a person may tap into the divine order and "universal energy," or "god energy," to which each person has access. Relaxation is the first step in meditating; once a state of relaxation is achieved, then various symbolic devices are employed to "work on" whatever aspect of healing is pertinent at the time. Positive visualizations are used to picture a state of balance, which includes being happy, healthy, and wealthy.¹¹ Positive visualizations may also be used with a specific condition, such as a tumor, to visualize the tumor shrinking and dissolving.

Verbal affirmations are also a technique that may be used during a meditation, or any other time that is convenient. The most powerful form of affirmation that can be used is that which begins "I am..." and is followed by whatever words represent the reality that one wishes to create. The "I am ..." device is thought to be the most powerful because it is one of the fastest ways to invoke the universal or god-energy; therefore it should not be taken lightly. For example, repeating the phrase "I am so sick and tired" may summon universal energies to manifest these conditions in one's life.

What these methods of healing appear to involve is building a sense of personal empowerment which allows individuals to take control of the conditions of their lives and their experiences. McGuire notes that "... Another key factor in healing illness is the ability of language [and other ritual symbols] to produce a sense of order" (McGuire 1988:214) by providing a framework within which to understand experiences and offering guidelines to assist in manifesting healthy change.

A central symbol used in rituals and basic development activities is that of energy. Energy is a multivocal symbol which can refer to an "elemental force of the universe," light, heat, and god-energy. Energy can also signify mainstream scientific notions, such as electromagnetic units and transferences of energy.

In the church's healing system, energy is something that requires directed use and

¹¹ "Wealthy" in this sense does not mean primarily monetary wealth, although that is certainly part of it; wealth is a more general notion referring to a whole and happy life.

moderation which can be achieved through working with the "zeal faculty," a center of energy and enthusiasm located in the back of the head. One of the female ministers stated, when she was discussing her formative work with the zeal faculty:

"Well, Monday mornings I had a lot of energy, by Thursday and especially Friday I was dragging, so it wasn't that I lacked the zeal it was that I lacked the moderation of it. So, I began working with it, being aware of moderating my zeal throughout the week. This was the easiest way for me because the way I relate to energy is to work with the zeal faculty so, just work with that and you'll find that you moderate it automatically, and then you'll have energy throughout the week and you won't dissipate it."

Energy is essential to the healing process and often is symbolically framed in terms of colored lights. The visualization of a colored light or energy, which is often a part of meditation, corresponds to what aspect of healing one is working on: green symbolizes healing in general, light blue or purple is appropriate for communication matters, gold is for prosperity, pink and red are used to work on love, and so on. White is the most powerful form of light energy because it contains all the other colors; white is often visualized when the healing work is very serious or when a "protective field" is needed to surround and protect someone from harmful influences.

Energy is the primary force that is utilized by healers in the "hands-on" healing ritual. This type of psychic or spiritual healing is available to chapel members every week at the Sunday night service. After the group is led through a guided meditation, chairs are set up in the front of the room and the healers take their place behind the chairs. Whoever is leading the service that night will announce that anyone requiring healing for themselves or others should come to the front of the room and take their place in a healing chair. (Most people who attend the Sunday service receive "a healing" in this manner). One healer describes her technique as such:

"So for me, once I open up the aura [the energy field around the body which also is discussed in terms of colored light] I may put my hands on their shoulders or just above their shoulders and I wait for a sense of heat usually in my hands, it doesn't have to be heat but energy of some sort, and again I'm a fire sign so I relate to energy, okay, rather than the physical so much, but what I did find out from my mother early on when I was healing was that when my hands start to feel very hot it's time for me to move on, because I was doing a healing with her one time and she said she thought her head was going to explode. She just couldn't wait for me to move my hands, so I knew what I was experiencing at the time was suddenly feeling energy and heat under my hand, and what I mean by that is most of the time I usually work with the left hand behind the body and the right hand in front of the body and I'm working with the *chakras*. I start moving them and what I'm doing is looking for a transference of energy between my hands. Now, I've got the person's body between my hands but I can feel an energy, suddenly there will be an energy, and as soon as I sense that I move on because of what my mother told me, she really felt like she was going to be electromagnetically blown apart, and that's very possible."

Healers are working to bring energy "up" in people for healing purposes. Sometimes "gaps" will be felt in the energy field of the body. As one female healer explained: "If you're not feeling energy with a person's *chakra* it can be that they depleted it in some way ... generally it indicates that there's a need for some balancing in that *chakra*. It might be depleted, there might be holes in it due to chemicals in the body or other reasons." Healers discern energy problems physically and psychically and they will often relay their findings to the person in the healing chair when the service is over.

Healers may also call upon spirit guides and teachers¹² in the healing ritual: the same female healer noted that "Most of the time I'm working with my healing teachers [spirits], although sometimes I will sense that a person who is sitting in the chair -- a healer of theirs will move in, a healing guide or spirit, and I may work with them but most of the time I work with my teachers."

Spirit guides do not assist only healers; they are also available to everyone involved in self-healing and spiritual development either through direct psychic communication or through more symbolic means (i.e., spirit guides may appear in dreams). Spirit guides may also assist in maintaining personal control:

"...I was losing my temper -- which I don't do very often -- but if I do, I suddenly let go of it. I was out of control and I remember standing at work one day and it was just all these words coming out of my mouth and all of a sudden my guides moved up so fast it wasn't funny -- I thought something was leaning on me, and I realized it and stopped in mid-sentence and just took a deep breath" [female minister and healer].

THE POSITION OF WOMEN AND THE COUNTER-HEGEMONIC NATURE OF THE SPIRITUALIST-METAPHYSICAL HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

There are two important questions that emerge from this study of a health care system in a Spiritualist-metaphysical religious context. First, what significance does psychic-spiritual healing have for women? That is, why are more women than men involved with this type of healing? Second, is this a counter-hegemonic movement in relation to biomedicine and American culture?

The junctures between the Spiritualist-metaphysical "world view" and the women's movement and feminism can be detected in the ideology at the chapel, which affirms the importance of self-control, responsibility, and personal empowerment. Typical views in Western society have shifted responsibility away from the individual by separating the domains of the mind from the body and allocating religion to the study of the former and science to the latter. In this scenario disease is caused by pathogens, as opposed to people's practices, beliefs, and mental attitudes. The health ideology at the chapel tries to remedy this

¹² Spirits, or those who have made "the transition" (death), act as advice givers and guides to those still on the "earth plane."

dichotomization between mind and body and empower the individual with her or his own healing capabilities. Healing comes from within, and one cannot depend on doctors or psychic healers for their recovery; these practitioners can only facilitate healing.

Women, as well as men, are encouraged to take control of their own health and not depend on biomedical experts, drugs, or even herbal treatments:

"I think we all -- I think that the herbs and the vitamins and the minerals are very -- like what I always say, that if it helps you to be happy and healthy do it. Find out what makes *you* happy and healthy and do it. Also, our body produces all these minerals and all these things from the earth. Our body does produce those things, it's just a matter that we stop functioning so well in some parts of the body and we need to stimulate it to get it going. I have a philosophy that if you're going to use herbs -- are you going to use them for the rest of your life? --then they're going to be just like the medicine. An herb is a drug just like medicine is a drug. If you use too much of it then another part of you is going to suffer from it. You can go throughout life without being dependent on any herb, mineral, or medicine. Here again, it's just a matter of what works for you and only you can decide that" [pastor].

Because healing ultimately comes from within each person, no one else, including a physician, can act as an authority figure in this regard: "This is part of our understanding is that no matter what other people think, you know what works and you go and do that and don't allow other people to influence you" [pastor].

According to church members, women were especially suited for psychic-spiritual healing and development because of their inherent characteristics, which are healing, intuitive and nurturing, and their socialization.¹³

"I think women tend to have an easier understanding of this ... I think women's intuition brings them into psychic healing because we're taught that it's okay for us to be intuitive and so we get into it more that way as nurturers which comes automatically. Even if you're not a mother you tend to baby things all the time -- that comes naturally and what you'll find is that you begin to recognize healing. Like when a child picks up a little hurt bird or something there's just healing flowing like mad from that kid into there, and usually it's a female-- not always but most of the time, and so I think that healing is very natural for women" [female minister and healer].

The notion that women are well suited for psychic healing and development is reinforced by some of the fundamental symbols of the church, wherein "left" symbolizes the intuitive, spiritual and female aspects, and "right" symbolizes the logical, physical and male characteristics. This ideology is put into practice when discussing the body; if a person feels a sensation in her or his left knee, this may indicate that a change needs to be brought about

¹³ Unlike in the 19th century, however, women no longer have to be sickly to reinforce their spirituality. The path of spiritual development and health now compels women to be healthy and happy and whole.

in the female and spiritual facets. The knee symbolizes flexibility and the left is the female and spiritual side, so a pain or tingling in the left knee could signify that one needs to be more flexible and accepting of her or his female and spiritual attributes. Because the chapel is a Spiritualist church, there is a considerable amount of emphasis on the left side, although it is stressed that all humans have both male and female components. Interestingly, the two male healers who I interviewed tended to work more with physical conditions (the right sphere), while the female healers saw their specialties as lying in the healing of "energy conditions" and emotions (the left sphere).

Although participating in psychic healing seems to reinforce American cultural stereotypes of women as emotional, nurturing, and sensitive, this doesn't mean that women at the church are not progressively oriented towards women's liberation. One of the healers noted that in the 1970's, when there were only three male members of the chapel, there was much discussion at the church about women's rights and the women's movement. This healer felt that the Spiritual-metaphysical philosophy really grew and benefitted from the interface with feminism. As with the Spiritualist movement in the 19th century, women at the church today support the autonomy and empowerment of women, although they are not advocating a radical feminist stance involving the restructuring of patriarchal society as a whole. Rather, they promote making inroads within the system as it now exists, primarily within the arena of self-care and responsibility for women's health and well-being. This focus on holistic alternatives to women's health may be partially the result of "loss of faith" in the biomedical system (McGuire 1988). "Women's experiences with unpleasant, callous, or medically unsatisfactory treatments related to their reproductive system were also often the bases for such 'loss of faith'" (McGuire 1988:190).

Some theorists have discussed the tensions that have arisen between the differing degrees of feminism in the "new" religious and healing movements. These movements "offer women a method of personal calming and adjustment within a largely unchallenged patriarchal status quo... For these reasons, radical feminists regard such 'new' religious movements as a stopping place or side track for the energies of questioning women who are unsettled and uncertain about the deeply different directions facing women today" (Culpepper 1978:221).

However, other feminists have taken an interest in the notion of spirituality, asserting that "the personal is political is spiritual" (Culpepper 1978:224). "That there is an emerging feminist interest in spiritual expression really should come as no surprise since it is essentially inherent in the initial feminist insight that 'consciousness raising' is what we are about" (Culpepper 1978:221). Additionally, Rennie and Grimstead (1974:49) have noted

"widespread and surging interest in what we can, for the moment, loosely call the spiritual aspects of life ... In acknowledging this side of our being, women are in effect striving for a total integration and wholeness. Accepting the wholeness that includes psychic awareness and exploration takes feminist consciousness into an entirely new dimension -- it amounts to a redefinition of reality."

The gender ideology at the chapel intersects then with some of the precepts of feminism by supporting the empowerment of women. Radical feminists, however, would find fault with the scope of personal empowerment advocated at the chapel, because it does not

challenge the basic structure of American society.

As for their counter-hegemonic tendencies, alternative healing movements are often thought to challenge mainstream medical authority by suggesting more holistic means to health care. While this is true to some extent for the health belief system at the chapel, it is also true that the church's philosophy is very pluralistic in recognizing the importance of the co-existence of alternative healing and biomedicine.

It is appropriate here to reiterate the Gramscian notion that hegemonies and counter-hegemonies are never totalizing; a seemingly counter-hegemonic movement is usually a complex mixture of accommodation *and* resistance and the Spiritualist-metaphysical healing ideology examined in this paper is no exception.¹⁴

Biomedicine is described by chapel members as a "true science," which may be called upon when necessary:¹⁵

"I would like to say to you that one of the things that we strongly believe here is that there are times when you need a physical doctor to intercede and we would never tell somebody not to go to a physical doctor because sometimes a healing can really take place and in fact we know of instances where people have experienced a psychic healing that has actually loosened tumors and when the doctor went in to do the actual operation he didn't have to sever anything, the tumor was already severed and all he had to do was lift it out ... for him that was absolutely incredible" [female minister and healer].

"We all have our purpose in healing -- psychics, doctors. I believe there are some diseases of the body that in order to heal require a final step by a doctor ... there are certain conditions that by going to the doctor get quickened and get out faster" [pastor].

The combination of faith (spiritual beliefs) and medicine is important in some cases of healing. A female healer, who recently received her healing certificate from the chapel,¹⁶

¹⁴ Burns (1987) also notes the same phenomenon of accommodation and resistance in Spiritualist churches in his review of Hans Baer's ethnography entitled The Black Spiritual Movement (1984). Baer, on the other hand, interprets black spiritualism as primarily counter-hegemonic to racial stratification.

¹⁵ Harwood (1977:204) finds a similar pattern in his study of Spiritualism as a mental health resource: "In cases involving somatic problems, our data have shown that mediums do not generally object to their clients' use of physicians and that indeed they may prepare clients for medical treatment by allaying some of their fears ... Our data contain numerous examples of similar 'medical referrals' by spirits and also of spiritual inspirations for herbal and pharmaceutical cures".

¹⁶ This woman received her healing certificate from the pastor of the church, after attending the self-development classes on healing. She described her certificate to me as such: "Oh, it's beautiful, I should have brought it to show you. It's beautifully written like -- although this may not be a good comparison -- it looks to me like the doctor's creed of what you promise -- that you would never use this for any other than the good and divine order and I believe that in my soul, it's not something that I just say."

related the experience with her sons:

"... I would try to get them to heal themselves. Ever since they were little I would give them a pill and say 'In the name of Jesus.' And even my husband, I don't care how big he is, how grown he is, I would say 'In the name of Jesus take this,' like the faith part has to be in it -- I would not say just the faith, I've got more brains than that, and I would not say just the medicine, you can't be that naive."

There are some obvious convergences between biomedical and Spiritual-metaphysical beliefs, such as the utilization of the scientific model, upon which, of course, biomedicine is founded. The adoption of scientific principles by Spiritualism and metaphysics was discussed in the historical section of this paper, and this trend continues today. Metaphysical "laws," which sound very much like physical and scientific principles, are often discussed at the chapel. The Law of Cause and Effect, for example, indicates that what one "puts out" in the world will come back to the individual ten-fold, so if one dwells too much on negative thoughts, words, and actions, these will come back to the person and make her or him really miserable. Likewise, if positive thoughts (and even money) are projected into the world they will also come back ten-fold and sustain one's prosperity and health. This example highlights the importance of combining rational (law) and nonrational (intuitive) beliefs.

One of the female ministers at the chapel is convinced that physics and science will eventually prove spiritual and metaphysical phenomena:

"I'm not sure how but I've picked up some of the psychic experiments that they're doing in physics and they're going to prove it ... once they quit trying to use physical instruments to measure something that's non-physical, that's where we get into trouble... It's hard to test the psychic abilities and redemonstrate them and that right now is how science looks at things. If something can be demonstrated more than once with the same variables then it exists -- well, the psychic world isn't like that, because I can't do a reading for you at the same exact moment twice in a row, because it won't be the same moment. Everything I just said to you two minutes ago has already begun changing something within you and I'd do another reading with you and it would come out differently, but it will be just as valid and just as accurate, maybe more so than any scientific experiment could ever prove -- that's where I think we're going to get into trouble, but somebody will come out with it, there will be a way when the world is ready to accept it."

It is evident that there is some degree of accommodation to and adoption of the biomedical and scientific models espoused in American culture. There is also a fair degree of resistance as well, which can be witnessed in the belief that biomedical science is ignorant of--and even inferior--to psychic healing. Recall the example of the inaccuracy of medical testing and how the same physical test may produce different results every time because conditions leaving the body change as they exit. Because biomedical doctors are ignorant of this process, they may diagnose a person with disease "X" and employ radical interventions (i.e., surgery), or doctors may re-manifest a condition in the patient that was on its way out and would have healed itself naturally.

The pastor of the chapel, who believes that biomedical doctors also have their roles to fulfill, also asserts that "Where there is a holistic movement with backers, the AMA [American Medical Association] has a way of looking down on it because they [the holistic healers] get the people cured and the AMA doesn't, they just look at the symptoms and push the pills." This, in fact, is the major drawback of biomedicine according to church members: it generally just looks at the symptoms and not the holistic framework within which illness and dis-ease manifest.

Thus, spiritual-metaphysical alternative healing is counter-hegemonic in the true Gramscian sense, because it demonstrates the complex confluence of accommodation and resistance in counter-hegemonic movements. Wagner (1983) has actually placed alternative religious healing movements along a continuum of radical to moderate counter-culturalism; on this continuum, Spiritual and metaphysical healing fall in the moderate range. Wagner distinguishes between the "occult counterculture"-- i.e., young people who have responded to the fragmentation and "overchoice" in modern life by becoming ultra-structured and authoritarian (e.g., Hare Krishnas)--and the "occult establishment"--the middle-class, middle-aged group of people whose search for "something more" generally does not call for radical transformation of lifestyle. Wagner classifies Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship, a midwestern metaphysical and healing group, within this latter genre. I would argue that the chapel discussed in this paper also falls within the purview of the "occult establishment."

While it is true that the chapel to some extent is reinforcing American middle-class cultural values of control, order, responsibility, and independence, the idea of self-empowerment and autonomy from hegemonic institutions, such as biomedicine, is also important. Additionally, the Spiritualist-metaphysical healing philosophy is not just another modern example of religiously inspired individualism, rather, members at the chapel stress healing others as well as themselves and building networks of helping and sharing in order to apply spirituality to practical ends.

Conclusion

In addition to augmenting the literature on religion, healing, women, and alternative practices, this study also points to the presence of non-mainstream health care systems within American society. Indeed, 10 million Americans are involved in health care practices similar to those described in this paper (McGuire 1988:4). Biomedicine needs to become cognizant of the realities of alternative health care in our society so that the needs of health seekers are met by informed and open-minded medical practitioners. Some have suggested that community health models incorporate local health care strategies such as psychic healing (Harwood 1977). Additionally, "Our research strategies need to take into account that believers (and nonbelievers) are not merely disembodied spirits, but that they experience a material world in and through their bodies" (McGuire 1990:294). Finally, the importance of alternative health care in the empowerment of women needs to receive wider attention so that women can gain greater control over their own health.

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