

Anikó Veronika Vukov

RESEARCH ON THE CURRENT PRACTICES OF INFORMAL HEALING – ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

Abstract

This study attempts to provide insight into the workings of today's unofficial healers through their own and their patients' narratives. The subjects of my study engage in practical activities that can be traced back to the work of healers in traditional peasant communities. After a conceptual and research history review, I analyzed the narratives of healers and patients according to the literature of folk and alternative healers, focusing on the healing image, self-representation, the background philosophy of healing, and the economic aspects of their activity.

Introduction

Among the different areas of traditional peasant culture, the world of folk medicine traditions has been preserved in great details by ethnographic literature. Considering the fact that we can meet informal healing strategies today as well, the following question arises: How are these phenomena related to the old world of traditions? Furthermore, what would be the terminological framework that is appropriate for presenting their similarities and differences? In my study, I research healing with the use of herbs, as well as chiropractic techniques, as practice-based healing activities of the present. I attempt to interpret certain parts of my interviews with healers and their patients/customers along the notions and characteristics of folk and alternative healing. These two categories will be defined briefly as the contexts of my research. Gabriella Vámos compared the main characteristics of the work of folk and alternative healers under different headings based on the data from literature and cultural history (Vámos 2014:150–152). I interpreted my own interviews with the application of this typology. I intend to answer the question of

how these two areas relate to each-other in the individual narratives – do these two types diverge, or overlap instead?

The current healing/recovery strategies fall outside the official canon and are based on (word-of-mouth) tradition and custom; thus, I interpret them as ethnomethodological phenomena. According to the developer of this notion, Harold Garfinkel, ethnomethodological studies analyze everyday activities as members' methods for making those same activities visibly-rational and-reportable-for-all-practical-purposes, i.e., 'accountable,' as organizations of commonplace everyday activities." (Garfinkel 1967: 1).

I have divided the study into the following sections: first, I introduce the methodology of my research; then I review the use of the notions (folk, folk healing, alternative medicine, naturopathy). Following this, I analyse the narratives collected by me relying on the literature.

I hope that revealing this small section of the diversified topic can serve as an addition to becoming aware of the "culture of the everyday" characterized by the diversity of different strategies. Although both the field of my research and most of the literature are Hungarian, I believe that these current "findings" may represent phenomena that are familiar for cultural researchers from other countries as well.

Research methodology

In this study, the reference point of the research conducted, is aiming at the individual micro levels. This is the approach of Vilmos Keszeg and Dóra Czégényi, according to which the behaviour of the healer and the patient is a cultural category (2010:423). The study of the situations and attitudes of healing reveals whole systems of social worlds and human relationships. (Keszeg and Czégényi 2010, 428). The objective of my fieldwork – performed in different settlements within Csongrád county – was becoming aware of the phenomena of contemporary informal healing. I conducted individual semi-structured interviews that I analysed using the typology of literature, trying to find answers to the following questions: how do people performing healing activity rooted in the peasant culture relate to old tradition of healing? Based on their narratives, do they resemble the healers of the old traditional culture, or can they increasingly be considered as parts of the alternative healing segment?

Folk healing, alternative healing, naturopathy- a review of notions

According to the Lexicon of Hungarian Ethnography, “in the traditional peasant culture, village people engaged in healing are called ‘javas’ (medicine man), ‘kuruzsló’ (quack), ‘látó’ (seeing person), or ‘orvos’ (doctor). Until the middle of the 20th century, healthcare in villages had not been satisfactory. As we are moving back in time, we see fewer and fewer professional physicians, and we can observe that patient care in segregated communities of small settlements used to be performed by healing specialists. These people usually had acquired their skills from other, one- or two-generation-older and more experienced healers (often through family tradition), which they then enriched with their own experience. The healers show some kind of specialization. (...) In most villages, there lived a man or a woman who was famous for their good knowledge of the healing effects of herbs. Fixing sprained (or broken) limbs required special manual skills – this was performed by bonesetters (“csontrakó”)⁸ (Grynaeus et al. 1979, 362–363).

According to Mihály Hoppál, the expression “folk healing” embodies the self-healing practice that used to characterize village lifestyle, opposed to official medicine and scientific healing. “Folk healing used to work as a part of everyday traditional culture. Everydayness is an important criterion in this respect since there used to be someone in every family (...) who was familiar with at least a significant part of the knowledge of folk healing. Naturally, there were also healing specialists in every community.” (Hoppál 1990, 694).

In my research, I interviewed people from the county seat, smaller towns, and villages as well, and the statement above is focused on the knowledge set of traditional peasant communities. Talking about the traditional peasant culture, Mihály Hoppál mentions everydayness, self-healing strategies, and the statement of independence from the principles of official/scientific canon. These concepts feature the lay healing methods of our days as well. Balázs Gémes’s study presents conclusions that are also valid and current in the interpretation of contemporary folk healing and folk healers. He emphasises that “folk” means belonging to the “common people”, and on the other hand,

⁸ The words bonesetter (“csontrakó”), or more often chiropractor (“csontkovács”) are commonly used today as well in relation to people performing manual therapy and chiropractic treatment.

it can signify an ethnic community, too. In his study, he highlights the necessity of the current research that also enables an easier understanding of the changes. (Gémes 1979, 26).

American folklore researcher Alan Dundes writes: "The term 'folk' can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is- it could be a common occupation, language, or religion- but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals. A member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity" (Dundes 1965:2). Regarding "non-orthodox" healing, Keith Bakx uses then notion of "folk" consistently, which – in his understanding – „combines two distinct but essentially connected elements: the first is that of culture; the second is that of choice. The medical practices are intimately related to consumer preference patterns that operate within specific cultural milieux". (Bakx: 1991:21).

Currently, the expression "folk culture" rather refers to a historical category: it can be attached to communities with a traditional lifestyle that pass on their tradition by word of mouth. Since we are in the age of mass media, we can access information from the media or the internet. István Povedák applies the notion of "popular culture" to the phenomena of our days. This is how one can refer to the diminished separation line between the former "elite" and "folk" categories. (Povedák 2004, 86).

A folk healer is the healer of the peasant community in its "classic" sense, as opposed to the alternative healers of the present. Gabriella Vámos distinguishes alternative healing from both official and folk healing which she defines the following way: "A system of healing supported by a specific theory of interpreting health and illness. Besides the required skills of anatomy, it also includes the knowledge of pathology and counselling, and relies on materials of plant and mineral origin known in folk healing, as well as the role of diet and the faith in the self-healing power of the body. Its followers develop a new type of health and illness notion that becomes their philosophy of life. From the early 20th century, when Eastern teachings also became influential, and especially after the esoteric explosion of 1989, healing methods reflecting the features of alternative spirituality appeared as well." (Vámos 2014:147).

With respect to the worldview the determinant factor of alternative healing was the spiritual-esoteric trend of New Age that incorporates Eastern philosophies, Christian gnosticism, and various mystic trends as well. It is connected to the holistic view on the body and health that emphasizes alternative and natural healing methods such as massage, diet based on natural ingredients, chiropractic procedures, and acupuncture (Melton 2016).

The unofficial healing methods appearing in the contemporary scene are compressed into the common notion of CAM (Complementary and Alternative Medicine) in the English-language literature⁹: “Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), any of various approaches intended to improve or maintain human health that are not part of standard medical care, also known as conventional, or Western medicine. The various approaches of CAM typically are used in a manner that is complementary to standard medical practices or are used in place of standard medicine. Such approaches are sometimes referred to as holistic or traditional medicine, although those areas of medicine do not cover all forms of CAM. Indeed, CAM includes not only classical systems, such as Ayurvedic medicine and traditional Chinese medicine, which are centred on bringing together the mind, body, and spirit, but also a wide range of other forms of therapy, including chiropractic medicine, biofeedback, art therapy, hypnosis, prayer, specialty diets, and therapeutic touch” (Saks, 2018).¹⁰

Since the end of the 1980s, the widespread name for the activity of healers in the fields of phytotherapy, manual therapy, traditional Chinese medicine, etc, has been called naturopathy. Similarly to CAM, it is an umbrella term used in public language, as well as in medical and legal professional terminology: In Hungary, Decree 11/1997 of 1997 of the Ministry of Health (V. 28.) assigned specific frames for the activity of healers practising naturopathy. According to this, specialized qualification is required for pursuing the activities under naturopathy (acupressure, alternative exercise and massage therapies, lifestyle counselling and therapy, reflex zone therapy). Continuing education concluded

⁹ The notion of CAM is equally used in professional terminology and by mass media. The phenomena of CAM are mapped by medical and healthcare literature on a continuous basis, supplemented also by social-scientific considerations in specific cases (e.g. Ribeaux and Spence 2001, 188–193; Tovey et al. 2004; Nichol et al. 2011, 117–125; Bishop and Holmes 2013).

¹⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/science/complementary-and-alternative-medicine>

with an exam is required to practice the following activities: alternative physiotherapeutic methods, methods applying bioenergy, phytotherapy, addictology procedures with ear acupuncture, kinesiological methods, eye training procedures.” After clarifying the most essential concepts and definitions, I would like to start the next section about interpreting the results of my empirical research.

Folk healing and alternative medicine in the interviews

Erika Koltay’s study provides a reference point for interpreting the notions of naturopathy and alternative healing methods, as well as for mapping their relation to folk healing (1993:53– 64). In her study, she reflects in a sensitive way on “alternative healers” emerging as a new cultural effect of the period after the regime change. She distinguishes between the categories of the former folk specialists and the contemporary alternative healers. Based on this, Gabriella Vámos added the intention of interpreting alternative medicine to Erika Koltay’s categorization, highlighting the points where the differences between the two areas are the easiest to apprehend according to her opinion: acquiring the knowledge, the initial experience, the philosophy behind the healing, the method of healing and the payment, based on the relation to the community (Vámos 2014: 150–151).

By the reason of thematic overlaps, I merged certain points for the analysis of the narratives collected by me: 1. Acquiring knowledge and the initial experience; 2. The method of healing/recovery, and the philosophy behind it; 3. Payment and the relation to the community.

I interviewed four healers, two of which use herbs for treatment: HB (born in 1986) and Mrs. FK (born in 1941); while the other two are chiropractors: PG (born in 1959) and SB (born in 1962). I also interviewed five patients: SZE (born in 1976), Mrs. FK’s patient; KL (born in 1968), has seen both PG and SB, MA (born in 1980), a customer of HB’s herbal products; JI (born in 1973), SB’s patient; and EK (born in 1965), a patient of both PG and HB.¹¹

¹¹ The subjects of my interviews, according to our agreement, are referred to by combinations of letters in my study.

The subjects of my interviews live in different settlements of Southern Hungary, Csongrád County. I interviewed healers from Ásotthalom, Mórahalom, and Szeged,¹² as well as their patients as I had the intention to present the healing activity and bounding of the inhabitants of the village, the smaller town, and the county seat as well. Since I am also interested in the eco-ethnographic aspect of informal medicine, I ensured “diversity” here as well: three of the healers are registered to issue invoices, two of whom claim they always issue an invoice at payment, while one of them gives a receipt to new patients/customers only. The level of education and cultural background of my interview partners also showed diversity. Each healer has customers from all segments of the scale regarding their level of education. Two of the healers hold university degrees, and three of them have obtained certificates of specialized courses (sports masseur, medical masseur, herb-shop assistant).

1. Acquiring knowledge and the initial experience:

The healer who acquired their chiropractor skills from an old peasant man often uses the expression “healing energy of the universe” that they had heard in a TV programme. Another healer, who performs manual therapy, says: “...I myself also learned the technique from old folk healers of Békés county after it was found out that I had some natural abilities for it” (PG). The “folk” source, on the other hand, mythicizes his activity and contributes his personal brand.

The knowledge acquired in traditional ways can be in harmony with a herb-gatherer qualification of the National Qualification Register, a Pharmacist university degree, or a medical masseur qualification – the subjects of my interviews not only have deepened their knowledge with these but also aimed to create the legal basis for their activity in the modern healthcare market. Books, journals, contents available on the Internet, articles, forums, and blogs, etc. offer further opportunities to access information. Among journals, *Herbáció* is one of the most popular ones¹³, while Maria Treben’s “Health through God’s Pharmacy” published in 1990 is the single most popular book in the field.

12 The large village of Ásotthalom had 3,856 inhabitants based on data from 2017,-the small town of Mórahalom had 6,090 inhabitants in 2011, while Szeged, the county seat had a population of 161,879 in 2016.

13 The objective of the magazine published quarterly since 2006 “is to collect formulae from all parts of the world in the subject of using herbs and spices in special folk medicine, naturopathy, and phytotherapy.” (Source: www.herbacio.hu)

The German housewife, an enthusiastic follower of phytotherapy, not only gathered and used herbs, but also wrote several books about their beneficial effects. After the regime change in Hungary, this book created momentum to a wave of interest in herbs, furthermore, the older generation recognized the legitimation of their knowledge acquired during their childhood/young adulthood. Erika Koltay describes the effect of the book the following way: “its popularity, however, is not the result of the factual data and the greatness of the book itself but rather the content that has met tradition built on Christian culture – in this case, traditional healing and its old-world practice, to such an extent that during my collection activity in Transylvania I met, several times, the teas and infusions mentioned in the book that the herbal-medicine women built into the repertoire of their own formulae” (Koltay 1993:169).

Dorottya Balázs reports similar experiences in her study presenting the contemporary folk healing of Siklód: “the effect of literature on naturopathy is still very significant with respect to natural sciences of the village. Maria Treben’s book *Health through God’s Pharmacy* is available even in the local small convenience store, and this book is present practically in each household of Siklód. One of the specialists of the village specifically collects publications on naturopathy, and acquired the major part of their knowledge from these books.” (Balázs 2010: 93).

The miraculous basic experience is present for both the former folk healers and in alternative medicine. (For example, the Visitation of the Virgin Mary, or they feel the healing power since childhood, and it is activated in unexpected situations, etc.). In my own research, I had the following narratives of the initial experience: *“Already when I was a small child and I was around herbs, or I noticed any plants, even flowers, in the field or by the banks, I immediately asked: What is it for? That is, I did not say how nice it looked, neither did I tear it off – instead, I was really interested in them already, as others told me. And later too, it was obvious that this is what I am interested in and what I would like to do. I learnt the basic and most important things about herbs from my grandmother and my mother. They kept saying: M., you have an eye for this.”* (Mrs. FK)

“In front of my eyes, in front of my mind’s eye, so to say, these warnings are displayed. It is like a huge red caption on a white board. It appears even in my dreams. This is how I saw, a long time ago, when I started massaging people that I could use this for healing as well.” (SB)

The healers' initial experience is important and interesting information for the patients, too.

"I know that M. has been committed to herbs since she was a little girl. This is what older people noticed, too, and this is how she learned it from them." (SZE, who is Mrs. FK's patient)

"I think this is not something you can just learn. I mean, there are practical things that a master can teach to their disciples, but you need some innate, natural ability for it. This is why, one can say, a good chiropractor is different from a general practitioner." (KL, who is a patient of PG and SB).

"Who can become a healer? Well, it can be based on somebody's knowledge, their radiance, too, or they can even bring it from their previous lives." (JI, who is SB's patient).

According to the interviews, the world of folk tradition appears in the healers' and patients' narratives through mentioning the "older ones" (a parent or a healer from whom they had acquired their skills). By referring to them, the healer legitimizes (and also mythicizes) the skills they profit from in the present. "Innate, natural ability" and skills play a special role in the alternative narratives of the New-Age trend. The only difference is that they are less connected to the teaching/raising community, but these turning points are increasingly determined by the healers themselves in relation to their own healing life path and image. In the patient's/customer's narrative, it is mentioning the "radiance" and the "previous life" that signifies the use of the notion of the alternative field.

2. The method of healing/recovery and the philosophy behind it:

When referring to the "old healers" and the "old world" in an idealized way, the patients interviewed emphasized the close-to-nature lifestyle, and as a result of this, the "naturalness" of the materials used for healing, as well as the relationship between the healer and the patient.

"In the past, in small communities like villages, or even a longer time ago, in the tribal world, and even more, among ancient people, a factor was still present in healing which is completely missing now. What I mean is that the healer treated the patient with herbs that they themselves could see every day, anywhere, or even grew themselves, without being

aware of their healing effect. For example, they said: these are nettles, and they are good for this and that. And the patients saw and knew about nettles, but they were not familiar with their healing effect – this was the herbal-medicine man’s job. Now, on the other hand, pills are prescribed, and you have no idea what is in them. And you know even less about who made or developed them.” (MA, who is HB’s patient).

Those who see chiropractors or healers using herbs reason their decision with ideas that are part of the notions of alternative medicine and New Age.

“Healers of the old world, that is, herbal-medicine men and healers of the old Hungary, were definitely in harmony not only with the world around them, but with the whole universe. The reason why we have lost harmony at the universal level is the fact that medications are produced that often make people even sicker through their side effects. The out-of-harmony condition of all these people is reflected by the whole of the universe; this is the reason, among others, for the ozone hole and all the natural disasters” (EK, who is PG’s and HB’s patient).

The subjects did not use the word “alternative”, but they used the notion of naturopathy: *“Naturopathy is a very interesting thing, I think it can be learnt during a specialized course. One can also learn the old methods of healing” (KL, who is PG’s and SB’s patient). “I am interested in naturopathy, I often read the magazine with the same title. As far as I know, naturopathy touches on some abstract topics as well.” (SZE, who is Mrs. FK’s patient)*

The meeting of the folk/old and the expressions used by the New Age trend can also be tracked down in the healers’ statements. The subject who learnt their chiropractor skills from an “old peasant man” is happy to use the expression “healing energy of the universe” as well, which they heard in an educational TV programme. Catherine L. Albanese also highlights that the discourses of New Age and healing include statements like: „healing energies of the universe” or „harmonizing”, reflecting that healing also occurs at the level of the universe in the studied cases; therefore, one’s health can be interpreted together with their harmony with the universe. The opposite of this is also true: the lost balance of the universe leads to the development of diseases. (Albanese 1992: 75–76).

3. Payment and relation to the community:

“The healers of the traditional peasant communities were „not motivated by money” (Koltay 1993:61). I have not seen an example of this among the contemporary healers as they do their activity for subsistence. I have learnt about two more confidential relationships where payment was delayed or based on barter: „... they could not pay, and then I offered them to pay later when they can” (SB)

“We agreed that they would help to paint the house in exchange” (HB)

Patients described the relationship between money and healing in the following way:

“Obviously, seeing a chiropractor where a treatment costs more than ten thousand forints may be a huge amount of money for many people. I do not necessarily mean that they in fact can’t afford it – they could, but they think it is too much. Even if they would really need the treatment. In this case, I say: for me, it is too much to be sitting at the outpatient clinic for hours, and waiting, then coming back again, and so on. And if I think of time as money, then a ten-to-twenty-thousand-forint treatment is worth for me. The other reason is that I am seeing someone who has been wholeheartedly recommended by friends, whose treatment I trust. This is also a reason why it is worth that money for me.” (JI, who is SB’s patient)

“It is very interesting that when I buy an herbal product or some tea, I can see and deduct how much the active agent, that is, the plant costs, and I know the price of packaging and labour as well. Furthermore, I can ask questions in real time from the person who prepared the product. Of course, one can always say something is too expensive and that kind of stuff. However, for me it is important not to buy medications for three thousand forints or more in the flu season, when I am already sick, but instead, to consciously prevent becoming sick, or even heal myself with the use of herbs – for example, with ginger tonic.” (MA, who is HB’s customer)

Characteristics of the economic activity of the subjects, examples of individual strategies within the framework of informality. Two of them work full time; their whole income derives from this activity, and they can be placed within “white economy”. They are the ones who are happy to talk to the press, they both advertise themselves through printed or electronic platforms, and one of them operates an own website, too. The other category of healers is represented by the one who is very popular, but does not advertise themselves at all – their reputation spreads exclusively by word of mouth. They invoice

their massage activity, but “*only up to the limit which is minimally required, you know*” (SB). Besides this approach of the “grey economy” kind, “black economy” is represented by the herb gatherer for whom this is only extra income in addition to their “legal” activity, and they do not advertise themselves at all. Their products are sold not only for money but serve as a basis for exchange.

The strategies of the “grey” and especially, the “black economy” field can be fit into the notion of the second economy: second economy is the sector which “comprises all production and exchange activity that fulfils at least one of the two following tests: (a) being directly for private gain; and (b) being in some significant respect in knowing contravention of existing law. (Grossman 1982:245). Healing activity within the segment of the second economy requires communication and self-promotional strategies that individuals, in most cases, establish themselves.

Books and magazines about herbs published since the regime change, including Maria Treben’s extremely popular lectures and books, have contributed to the fact that the information about herbs is present as marketable knowledge. With the spread of the Internet, online articles, writings, blogs, social media sites, and online commerce ensure that information is accessible and for sale, contributing to the evolution of *homo oeconomicus*. The knowledge about herbs can be used not only for making teas and infusions, but for the preparation of different kinds of cream, oil, and soap as well. These latter ones can have a great variety of composition, enabling the use of traditionally-known herbs (such as marigold or chamomile), as well as those that have become popular recently (such as aloe vera, lavender, turmeric, etc.).

Summary

This study provided an insight into the world of today’s informal healers through the recollection of semi-structured interviews. In the narratives presented in the study, a clear separation line between the “folk” and “alternative” fields can hardly be drawn. In this respect, the subjects of my interviews did not seem to show any differences regardless of circumstances (such as their residence, level of education, or age). A confusion of the notions could be observed in all subjects: their narratives include references to folk culture and the peasant world as prefiguration, a source of acquiring knowledge, or a point of reference, and at the same time, they described the ideology behind healing and recovery with notions related to alternative medicine. Based on these

experiences, the quoted narratives can be accommodated into the category of “Complementary and Alternative Medicine”. Contemporary “folk” medicine and “folk” as a point of reference can be accommodated into the alternative area marked as an umbrella field within the notion of CAM. As a related statement expresses, „Folk medicine comprises "unofficial health beliefs and practices" which rely heavily (but not exclusively) on oral transmission. It is one form of alternative medicine, and a major source for many other forms such as phytotherapy and mind/body medicine.” (Hufford 1997:723).

The adjective “informal” in the title of the study comprises the main characteristics of the old folk and the contemporary alternative categories. The same pieces of information and cultural benefits are available for the subjects of the interviews to an equal degree and intensity. They also have the same options for their distribution and for establishing the narratives related to them – all this gives rise to diversified strategies, the common denominator of which is the appreciation of informality.

Source

Decree 11/1997. (V. 28.) of the Ministry of Health on certain questions of performing activities of naturopathy.

<https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=99700011.NM>

Downloaded on: 10 January 2018.

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