

Spiritual Transformation and Emotion: A Semiotic Analysis

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Spiritual Transformation and Emotion: A Semiotic Analysis

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The semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce is proposed as a theoretical framework that can model more adequately than conventional theories in psychology the emotional transformations in cultural practices that rest squarely upon self-transcendence as the basis for healing. For illustration, the Peircean notion of the sign is applied to an analysis of spirit healing in Puerto Rico. Clinical implications for psychotherapy in general, and treatment for alexithymia in particular, will be explored. 5
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KEYWORDS semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce, spirit healing, alexithymia, dialogical self

Central to the phenomena of spiritual transformation is self-transcendence, referred to by Deikman as “the loss of self” (1966), by Ricoeur (1974) as “displacement of the center” (p. 462), and by Mahoney and Pargament (2004) as a “fundamental shift in one’s relationship to the sacred, such that the sacred becomes the center” (p. 490). This calls into question the conventional wisdom in psychology that centers on the atomic self as the foundation for all things psychological. This article demonstrates how the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, a contemporary of William James and father of the American pragmatism, offers a more suitable framework for the phenomena of spiritual transformation. For illustration, a semiotic analysis will be applied to practices of spirit healing in Puerto Rico as documented by the anthropologist Koss-Chioino (1996, 2006). 15
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Exposition on the Peircean semiotics consists of three parts: First, I introduce, as alternative to the atomic self, a semiotic self (Wiley, 1994)

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which is a formulation of the self in terms of the structure and function of the sign. Next, I underscore the connection between sign and mind by applying the notion of mental spaces (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) to map out the triadic structure of the sign. Third, I explain the Peircean notion of sign function, with special focus on the implication that an efficient sign user is one who participates in efficient sign functioning. Various permutations of this theme are used to explain spirit healing. Clinical implications for psychotherapy in general and treatment for alexithymia in particular will be explored.

FROM ATOMIC TO SEMIOTIC SELF

The atomic self is part and parcel of the foundationalism prevalent in psychology. The need for a foundation to ground our experiences is manifest not only in the atomic self but also in the quest for basic emotions (Sundararajan, 2008). An antidote for this foundationalism is the Peircean semiotics that claims that representations, whether of self or emotion, are de-centered processes. The basic premise of the Peircean semiotics is that the relationship between any two terms is always mediated by a third term. The most radical expression of this claim is his notion of self-reflexivity that postulates the self to self-transaction—such as thought talking to itself—as a relationship mediated by a third term. This position has been taken by other thinkers as well, for instance Hegel: “For Hegel, reflexivity is not directly self-to-self, but indirect, via the other” (Wiley, 1994, p. 78). Herbert Mead referred to this self-reflexive loop as “triadic,” for “it always has a three-point, self-other-self . . . recursivity” (Wiley, 1994, p. 122). The “self-other-self” recursive loop translates readily into Bogdan’s (2000) “mind-world-mind” formulation, which renders more explicit the triadic structure inherent in the intermental (mind to mind) transactions. Permutations of the triadic intermental transactions are presented in Figure 1.

As Figure 1 shows, the intermental (mind to mind) transactions consist of three terms: Mind 1, Mind 2, and a third term. For instance, in the caretaker and infant transaction, this entails two minds—the child’s and the caretaker’s—sharing a third thing, the world (Figure 1, B). A cognate insight may be drawn from child development. Dyadic relationship between the infant and the care taker is referred to as “primary intersubjectivity” in which social signals are not directed toward a third term but rather toward the infant personally (Trevarthen, 1998). A more mature type of transaction is triadic intersubjectivity, characteristic of social referencing, which children from 8 or 9 months of age are capable of—when faced with ambiguous situations, young children look to adults’ facial expressions for guidance in interpreting the world as safe or dangerous, for instance. As Bogdan (2000) points out, social referencing is “triangular” in that it consists of “the mind-world-mind triangle” (p. 120).

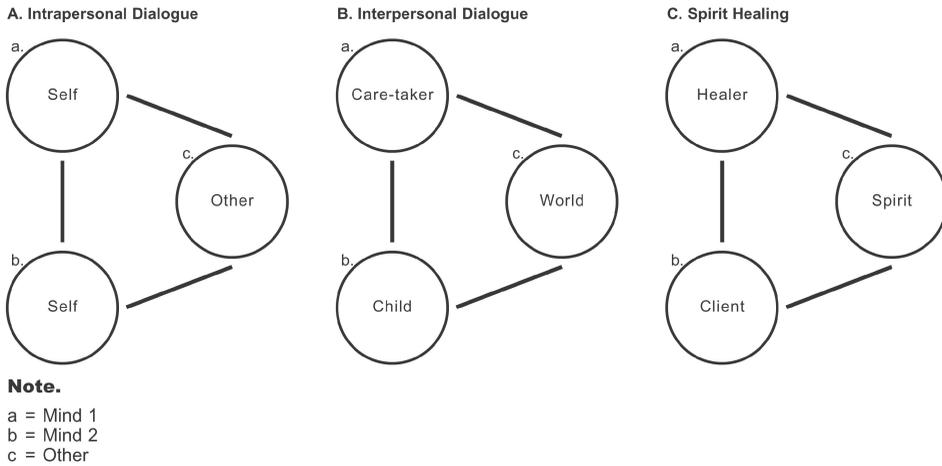


FIGURE 1 The Triadic Structure of Intermental Transactions

In the framework of mind-mind-world, the third term signifies not a numerical so much as an ontological difference—it is an other to the rest of the set. For instance “the world” is other, in terms of ontological status, to the two parties of a conversation. Presence or absence of an other—known as alterity or Other in the dialogical self-literature (Salgado & Gonçalves, 2007)—may be a differentiating factor between closed and open dialogues. In closed dialogues, such as ruminative self-talk (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008), the two parties of a conversation are tightly coupled to form one fixed mode of processing that recycles ad nauseum as if one were breathing in and out of a brown bag. In the context of neuroscience, the dyadic interaction between two systems is rightly referred to by Lewis (2002) as “internal monologue” (p. 182). Lewis (2002) interprets the personal positioning of the dialogical self (Hermans, 2001) as shifting monologues between two competing attention systems of the brain. But dyadic transactions—be it self-talking to an anticipated other or thought talking to itself—cannot be the basis for an open dialogue. What keeps the dialogue open is the insertion of the third term—an Other, in the sense of a new element outside the system, from another brain or from the world outside brains, for instance—into the flux of a conversation.

The triadic structure of mind-to-mind transactions is evident in any standard therapeutic relationship, in which the therapist or the healer is third party to the client’s self-to-self intrapersonal dialogue (Figure 1, A). But spirit healing goes one step further—it articulates another level of mediated relationship, in which an encounter between the healer and the client is mediated by the spirit as the third party (Figure 1, C). As Koss-Chioino (1996) points out: “The healer-client encounter is almost always a triadic (or even larger) relationship in ritual healing—between healer (or healers), client and spirit or spirits (or gods)” (p. 263). In the theoretical framework of

Charles Peirce, the mediated relationship of dialogues, intrapersonal as well as interpersonal, is a direct consequence of the triadic structure of the sign, 100 to which we now turn.

TRIADIC STRUCTURE OF THE SIGN

According to Charles Peirce (Parmentier, 1994; Colapietro, 1989), the conventional dyadic relationship between signifier and signified is mediated by a third element—the “interpretant” which refers to the mental operations that 105 make interpretations possible. Thus the sign consists of three terms instead of two: *representamen* (the signifying sign), *object* (the object of signification), and *interpretant* (interpretation). To reiterate the fact that the Peircean semiotics concerns primarily mental operations (Deacon, 1997), I use the notion of mental spaces (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) to map out the triadic 110 structure of the sign. Mental spaces are temporary and dynamic conceptual frameworks that function as affordances for specific mental operations. In the words of Fauconnier and Turner (2002): “Mental spaces are small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for the purposes of local understanding and action Mental spaces can be used generally to model 115 dynamic mappings in thought and language” (p. 40). According to Brandt and Brandt (2005), multiple mental spaces are needed to introduce the three terms of a semiotic sign in the Peircean framework (see Figure 2).

As illustrated by Figure 2, presentation space supports the task of representation or expression by means of the signifying sign, reference space 120 validation of the subjective experience, and virtual space the function of interpretation. According to Brandt and Brandt (2005), the virtual space is on a different plane of being—it is not situated in reality space, in which presentation space and reference space reside.

The importance of the virtual space is brought home by the following 125 song that typically begins a ritual healing ceremony of Haiti:

When the *laplas* (ritual assistant) arrives

To unfurl my flag

I am going to see where my *oungan* [priest] is. (Wexler, 1997, p. 59)

According to Wexler (1997), the song marks the moment for the ritual 130 entry of the *Vodou* flags into the temple: “Haitian Vodou flags, often richly ornamented with sequins and beads, are unfurled and danced about during ceremonies to signal the spirits” (p. 59). But this is not a simple 1-to-1 correspondence of flag = spirits. The framework of mental spaces (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) makes this clear: The flag first of all introduces the virtual 135

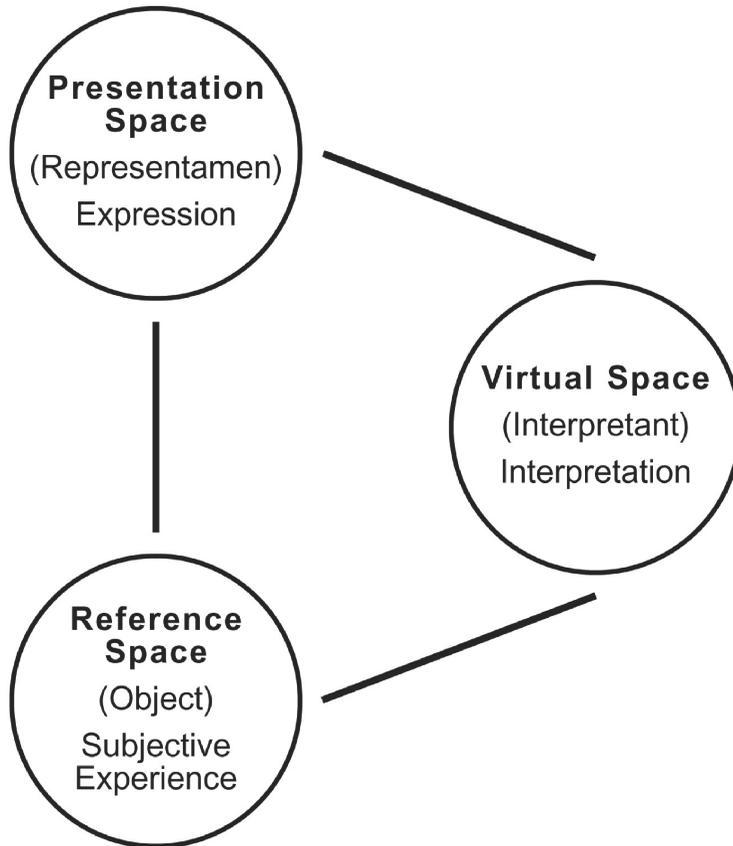


FIGURE 2 The Triadic Structure of a Sign Mapped Out in Mental Spaces

space, which supports the symbolic mindset. With the introduction of the virtual space, one is no longer mired in the mental space of everyday reality. Virtual space in turn determines the appearance of the priest in the presentation space—as indicated by the song, the priest will be “seen” only when the flag unfurls. In other words, it is only when one is thinking symbolically thanks to the instantiation of the virtual space that one is able to see Joe Schmo as “my priest.” With both the presentation space and the virtual space properly set up or activated, we can then expect to see “the oungan (priest) and the flag double as points of entry for the *lwa* (spirits), directing their energies into the ceremony” (Wexler, 1997, p. 59). The fact that “seeing the flag and seeing the *oungan* were intertwined events” (Wexler, 1997, p. 59) attests to the unique temporal framework of the semiotic sign. As Parmentier (1994) points out, “The sign relation . . . necessarily involves three elements bound together in a semiotic moment” (p. 25). But where is the third element of this semiotic moment, in addition to the spirit and the priest? It is the client, whose experiences—as indicated by the “I” and “my”

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in the song (“I am going to see where *my oungan* is”)—constitute the point of reference for it all. Another way of putting it is that the client resides in the reference space.

This complex web of relations among the mental spaces of a semi- 155
 otic moment will be elaborated later. Suffice it to note at this point that it is the introduction of the virtual space that sets in motion the chain of events. This observation is consistent with spirit healing in Puerto Rico, where the beginning and end of the ritual healing are coterminous with the opening and closing of the virtual space, respectively. As Koss-Chioino 160
 (1996) points out, the beginning of a healing session is devoted to the opening and preparing to receive spirit influences, whereas at the end, spirit influences are sealed off from the mundane world, and life folds back again into the plane of a lower dimensionality—the reality space. It is in spirit healing that the incommensurability, the otherness, of the vir- 165
 tual space as a third term in the semiotic web of relations is most clearly marked.

With the three mental spaces—virtual, presentation, and reference— 170
 simultaneously instantiated, adequate representation of experience is thereby made possible. But why representation of experience in the first place? Representations render visible or reportable what is otherwise cog-
 nitively unavailable. The importance of representation is best summed up by Charland’s (1995) dictums of “feeling *is* representing”; and “no representa-
 tion, no experience” (p. 73). Adequate representation of experience is part 175
 and parcel of efficient sign functioning, to which we now turn.

HEALING AS PARTICIPATION IN EFFICIENT SIGN FUNCTIONING

To recapitulate, the self is a de-centered process that is structured like a sign. One implication of this equation of the sign user and the sign is that healing may be understood in terms of facilitating the client’s participation 180
 in efficient sign functioning. An analysis of spirit healing in terms of efficient sign functioning may begin with the following vignette from Puerto Rico as a paradigmatic case.

At one spirit healing session two healer-mediums worked on Jose, 35-
 year-old man. The spirits molesting Jose were either “seen” and reported by the medium or possessed and spoke through the medium. The first 185
 spirit talked about extreme agitation and loss of control over behavior, accompanied by inability to think. The second spirit was severely hurt (“bloody,” self-destructive, the “darkness” in this man) by a work accident somehow associated with the client’s agitated “craziness” and lack of con-
 formity. A third spirit, seen by the medium, exposed the client’s wounding 190
 anger and frustration in relationship to his wife. Finally, a fourth spirit from

within the possessed medium addressed the client's underlying, possibly suppressed feelings, which were withdrawal, alienation, hopelessness and abandonment. Here is the transcript:

A spirit arrives here named Pedro Cruz who wants to put you in a state of agitated desperation. He takes your mind away. Sometimes you leave your house and arrive at another place. You have to control yourself in order not to run around or cry You are like a crazy person; you don't have a mind nor can react. [And then another spirit is seen who is] bathed in blood; he is a "spirit of color" [a reference to being dark-skinned], he comes to a machine and puts his hand on the tire. It could be some accident that you have had. [When the client says he no longer works at that job the medium "captures" that he left the work for a reason. She adds that he never conforms and although he tries to free himself the spirit says he is "caught."] He [the spirit] has you enclosed with your hands tied. [One of the mediums then asks if the client is jealous.] Is it you or your companion? These are diabolical, destructive jealousies. Let's see what it has to do with this spirit. [She then is possessed. The spirit, speaking through her, says] I will not greet you. Nobody looks at me. And that is how he is. No one helps him I come with strength. What are you going to do with me? Me, who was so hidden. (Koss-Chioino, 1996, p. 258)

The stage is now set for an analysis of spirit healing within the framework of efficient sign functioning.

Efficient Sign Functioning

According to Charles Peirce (Rosa, 2007; Lee, 1997), a fully developed sign has three modes of representation—icon, symbol, and index—each contributing uniquely to the overall efficiency of the sign. The icon embodies a relationship of contiguity between the representation and its object to ensure fidelity in representation; the symbol is one step removed from the object of representation to facilitate further elaboration through interpretations; and the index is a reference loop that counterbalances the abstract tendency of the symbol by calling attention to the object of representation. Equipped with these three modes of representation, a fully developed sign is therefore capable of integrating its multiple functions—the concrete expression of suffering (a function of the icon), understanding through elaboration and interpretation (a function of the symbol), and validation of subjective experience (the indexical function that calls attention to the object of representation).

All these modes of representation seem to be operative in the spirit healing.

Healer's Body as Iconic Representation

Icon describes a sign relation in which the signifying sign (*representamen*) is in a relation of spatiotemporal contiguity with the object of its representation (*object*), such that the former has to be actually modified by the latter (Lee, 1997). This requirement is met by the healer's body, which functions as a sign in the Representation space. According to Koss-Chioino (2006), in order to represent or "makes visible what has only been sensed or felt" (p. 28), the healer/medium has to physically experience the afflictions the client is suffering from: "The medium experiences the feelings as felt by the sufferer (*plasmaciones*), communicated through spirit visions (*videncias*) and/or possession by a spirit" (p. 885). Note that the spatial-temporal co-occurrence of affliction between the healer and the client is made possible by the intersubjective space, as Koss-Chioino (2006) points out: "Spirit work is based on the emergence of an intersubjective space where individual differences are melded into one field of feeling and experience shared by healer and sufferer" (p. 882). This interchange of affect consists of a mutual tuning-in and sensitization to feelings and emotions that flow between healer and client, resulting in a parallelism of inner states between the two parties.

The iconic representation can best be illustrated by the practice of molding or *plasmar* (i.e., mold, form in one's own bodies), in which the spirit causing distress in the client would affect healer's body the same way (Koss-Chioino, 1996). The function of the healer's "mirroring" the affliction of the client is to make a "diagnosis (that is, getting evidence) that describes the spirits and their reasons for causing distress to the sufferer" (Koss-Chioino, 2006, p. 882). But molding has another function besides providing diagnostic information, namely, it serves as an index. The difference between icon and index is summed up by Parmentier (1994) as follows: Whereas an icon provides some information about reality, such as the client's suffering and distress, an index "directs the mind to some aspect of [that] reality" (p. 7). The function of the indexical sign relation resides in the reference space.

Client as Reference Space

In addition to providing diagnostic information, "molding" also draws attention to the client's experience as point of reference for all interpretations. This is the function of the index, which, like the finger that points at the moon, is a sign that "has the effect of drawing the attention of the interpreter to its object" (Lee, 1997, p. 120). As Koss-Chioino (1996) points out, clients in the spirit healing do not usually verbally express their own feelings beyond confirming or denying the healer's description and interpretation of their experiences. Having confirmation and avowal of experience as his or her sole responsibility, the client embodies the Reference Space, which makes possible a reference loop from interpretation back to experience. This indexical reference loop that matches the healer's

“mirroring” with the client’s stress is essential for the “uniting of feeling and image” (Koss-Chioino, 1996) in spirit healing. An analogous mechanism is “social biofeedback” (Gergely & Watson, 1996), which makes it possible for the infant to construct emotional states, in particular, discrete feelings. Campos, Frankel, and Camras (2004) explain: 275

Social biofeedback refers to the process wherein the parent, by selectively exaggerating and mirroring the infant’s expressions, helps shape the expressions into more regular patterns and enables the child to match the feedback from his or her emotional expressions to his or her feeling states. (p. 387) 280

In addition to the backward movement of the indexical reference loop, a sign is capable of a forward movement toward further articulation or interpretation. This forward movement pertains to the sign relation as symbol, a function performed by the spirit as *interpretant*. 285

Spirit as Interpretant

The function of the sign as symbol is what is meant by Peirce as the interpretant. The mental space that makes it possible for the interpretant to function properly is the virtual space. The interpretant par excellence is the sign referred to as spirit in ritual healings. Spirits are instrumental to the articulation of complex, symbolic descriptions of complaints, causes, and context of illness and other distress along with their particular emotional valences (Koss-Chioino, 1996). The discourse of the spirit that serves the purpose of interpretation and elaboration is replete with psychodrama. For instance, the spirit (*causa*) that causes the client’s afflictions may enter the body of a healer and speaks to the client, telling the client what it is doing to them. The plethora of myths and rituals attests to the salience of the symbolic/metaphorical dimension of the spirit discourse. 290 295 300

Central to the psychodrama of the spirit is symbolic manipulation, for which a few examples from Koss-Chioino (1996) shall suffice: The spirit as the power that heals or damages can be divided into two categories, good and bad. The bad spirits cause illness and distress, whereas the good spirits function as spirit-guide-protectors, frequently a deceased intimate—mother, grandmother or maternal aunt. The healer can “take” the illness-causing spirit into his or her body with impunity because of the spirit-guide’s protection, which can be extended to the client, due to the identity relationship established between healer and client during the ritual. Rituals also make possible for malicious spirit to be educated and convinced to leave the client. However, the healer will proceed to “take off” the distress-causing spirit (*causa*) attached to the client, only after the latter verbally “forgives” the *causa*. 305 310

Symbolic manipulation in spirit healing has received much attention from researchers, probably because it is a familiar component in Western psychotherapy, especially the talking cure. What is unique, however, about the spirit discourse is the intimate connection between the symbolic and the iconic, the abstract and the concrete. For instance, the spirit is a symbol that has concrete, palpable manifestations: the client is introduced to or confronted by the spirit; and the healers' bodies are "vessels" (*cajas*) that can be opened to receive the spirit presences (Koss-Chioino, 1996). Integration of the concrete (sensations, moods, feelings) and the abstract (imagery, interpretation) in the spirit discourse is consistent with the observation of Koss-Chioino (1996) that healing symbols and rituals (the interpretant), even if emerging out of popular myths and images, are contingent upon cues from the flow of feelings and emotions between healer and client.

Koss-Chioino (1996, 2006) has identified two therapeutic effects of spirit healing, aesthetic distance and catharsis. *Aesthetic distance* is defined by Scheff (1979) as the extent to which "the individual is both participant and observer of" their own distress (p. 67). The foregoing analysis has shown how iconic representation, a sign function fulfilled by the healer's body, makes it possible for the client to simultaneously feel and observe his or her own distress mirrored in the healer. *Catharsis* is defined by Koss-Chioino (1996) primarily in the sense of purification or purgation that brings about spiritual renewal or release from tension. But the original sense of the term as used by Aristotle and rendered by Nussbaum (1986) as "clarification" or "illumination" would be more fitting. The interdigitation of the concrete and the abstract in spirit healing—concrete iconic expression of suffering through the healer's body, on the one hand; and abstract symbolic elaboration through the discourse of the spirit, on the other—helps importantly to render experiences of distress meaningful for the client, the sign user who seeks help. Put another way, spirit healing contributes to self-integration (Krystal, 1988), by performing the functions of an efficient sign that integrates subjective experience (foregrounded by the indexical sign function) with its expression (rendered visible by the icon), and understanding (rendered articulate by the symbol).

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

Consistent with Heidegger's dictum that "Man lives in language, as language" (cited in Ott, 1972, p. 169), Charles Peirce claims that the sign user is the sign they use: "the word or sign which man uses *is* the man himself Thus my language is the sum total of myself" (Peirce, 1931–58, Vol. 5, paragraph 314, emphasis in the original). One of the possible translations of this claim is that an efficient sign user is one who actively participates in efficient sign functioning, where efficiency is measured by the extent to which the sign can

represent experience adequately. This claim has implications for research in language and health, explored elsewhere (Sundararajan & Schubert, 2005). Its implications for psychotherapy in general, and treatment of alexithymia in particular, will be the focus in the remainder of the article. 355

Alexithymia is generally understood to be a personality trait characterized by difficulties in naming and interpreting emotions, and “constricted imaginal capacities, as evidenced by a paucity of fantasies” (Taylor, 2000, p. 135). These deficits may lead to symptoms of self-dysregulation such as eating disorder or substance abuse (Krystal, 1988; Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). A semiotic formulation of alexithymia would locate the deficits primarily in a lack of virtual space to support the symbolic functioning, an impairment which in turn results in inefficient representation of emotions (Sundararajan & Schubert, 2005; Sundararajan, Kim, Reynolds, & Brewin, in press). This formulation has important implications for the treatment of alexithymia. 360 365 Q2

If inefficient representation of emotions, as is the case with alexithymia, is hypothesized to stem from a loss of dimensionality in an individual’s sign system (such as the lack of a virtual space), then allowing the client to participate in a sign system that has its triadic structure intact can be predicted to be beneficial. This recommendation is followed through in spirit healing, where the triadic structure of the sign is kept intact by a division of labor—the burden of representation by means of expression and interpretation is carried by the healer and spirit respectively, while the client only has the responsibility of avowal that validates the representations. As Koss-Chioino (1996) points out, since clients in the spirit healing do not usually verbally express their own feelings beyond confirming or denying the healer’s evidence, “he or she is thus able to avoid the alexithymic barrier, allowing the healer (through spirits) to assume the burden of expression” (p. 256). Otherwise put, when it is made possible for individuals to participate in an intact and efficient system of representation, their limited capacity to express their emotions can be easily circumvented. 370 375 380 385

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This investigation begins with an anomaly that challenges the prevalent theories of emotion in mainstream psychology: The emotional transformations in cultural practices that rest squarely upon self-transcendence as the basis for healing. A semiotic analysis of spirit healing is performed to demonstrate the potential of the semiotics of Charles Peirce to explain emotional transformations in indigenous cultures, and to derive from this analysis implications for clinical practice. A tentative conclusion drawn from this analysis is that healing is to be located not in the individual psyche so much as in the participation of the client in efficient sign functioning. 390 395

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