

Essay 6. Anthropological approaches to pain demonstrate how the body uses creativity, imagination and language to reformulate the sense of self and to create social connections.
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Essay prompt, same as for essay 5: 'What insights about the body can be gained through anthropological approaches to pain?'

In Western biomedicine, pain classification is often arbitrary. Sub-acute or ongoing pain is commonly reclassified as chronic after six months. Often, this does not correlate with tissue damage (Morris 1991). Despite advances in imaging techniques and chemical testing, most efforts to source the site of chronic pain are fruitless. Moreover, almost all surgical attempts to alter neurological pain pathways are undone by the body's efficient generation of alternate routes which reinstate the suffering (Good 1992: 39). Chronic pain is genuine and takes over the sufferer's entire world, even though it might not be flagged up by biomedical markers. Such a powerful human experience enlightens much about the body. Many ethnographic case studies, linguistic interpretations and alternative narratives within anthropology have stepped in to provide insights about the body where biology and medicine fall short.

By reflecting on selected anthropological studies by Elaine Scarry (1985), Byron Good (1992) and Jason Throop (2008), this essay will demonstrate how the body uses imagination as a tool to formulate the sense of self and maintain social connections. Each of these works, influenced by the Harvard school of phenomenology,⁷ come to divergent conclusions and employ different research methodologies, yet each link pain to imagination and creativity. The connection between body, mind and pain is obvious, but the link between imagination, pain and sociability is less so. The body transforms suffering from a preverbal, physically bounded and isolating experience into one in which the human capacity for connection and belonging gives it language, physiological metaphors and often transformational frameworks with a moral component.

In *The Body in Pain* (1985), a literary discussion of the nature of pain and torture, Scarry argues that the experience of pain resists language. The sufferer feels pain through 'presymbolic shrieks'. Intense pain is 'worlds destroying' because it cannot be encompassed with language. She locates pain as a universal experience which is resistant to cultural

⁷ All these studies are heavily influenced by the earlier work of Alfred Schütz. In *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1967). His themes of intersubjectivity and social time are clear within the selected works and provide the framework within which to understand the interaction between the body, sociality, creativity and pain.

interpretation because so primitively experienced. A few years later, Byron Good (1992) challenged Scarry's conclusions in his ethnography *A Body in Pain: The Making of a World in Chronic Pain*. He argued that pain may initially come out in shrieks, 'but such deconstruction is countered by a human response to find meaning...' (ibid.: 29). Good reviews the aetiology of a chronic TMJ patient named Brian to conclude that pain is very verbal (ibid.: 35). Patients use language to manage and ground the 'de-objectifying' experience of pain.

Both Good and Scarry show that pain is traumatic because it isolates the sufferer from their experiences and the connected social world. Humans are social creatures, and the human body is a social instrument. In C. Jason Throop's (2008) *From Pain to Virtue: Dysphoric Sensations and Moral Sensibilities in Yap (Waqab), Federated States of Micronesia*, he demonstrates how the body can accommodate both states. In his ethnographic analysis of Yapalese back pain, he argues that, when people experience a functional transformation of suffering to the more socially valuable 'suffering for', the entire experience is rendered bearable.

These studies are essentially facets of the same anthropological piece. Each explore how creativity is used to frame pain and construct meaningful social connections. Scarry examines the individual and wider political and societal impacts of pain through a philosophic lens. Good uses a more intimate perspective within the narrative arc of the case study of Brian. Throop explores a larger cultural context with his ethnographic examination of Yapalese back pain. They all explore how emotional suffering adds to physical distress as pain isolates the sufferer socially from 'normal' shared experiences. Each emphasizes the 'worlds' encompassing the effect of pain; how the body in pain's experience shifts in the perception of time, language and even self. However, these authors only touch on concepts of creativity and pain, rather than using it as their central argument. This essay creates a narrative progression between their themes to explore the use of creativity and imagination by the body in pain. The essay ends by presenting the hypothesis that the body uses creativity to form bridges and fulfil its social needs.

Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985) establishes the conceptual framework which Good (1992) and Throop (2008) later populate. She says: '[Pain and imagination] are each other's missing intentional counterpart, and ... they together provide a framing identity of man.' (Scarry 1985: 169) She explores the individual and cultural frameworks of pain, considering the effect pain has on the individual, as well as expanding her reasoning to macro, philosophical and cultural constructs. Scarry

repeatedly asserts that pain defies language and serves as a destructive force which 'unmakes' an individual. Importantly for the argument, she also posits the need for factors which drive a 'remaking' of the world to produce language and culture.

After exploring the socially destructive powers of pain, Scarry discusses the actions that re-'make' the world, namely creativity and imagination. She sees physical pain and imagination as opposing forces, however closely linked. This objectlessness (of pain), the complete absence of referential content, almost prevents it from being rendered in language: objectless, it cannot easily be objectified in any form, material or verbal. This objectlessness may give rise to 'imagining' or to a creative linking of interior states with companion objects in the outside world (Scarry 1985: 162).

She proposes that pain has neither object nor creativity nor imagination, but requires symbols and objects to express it. Creativity is needed, argues Scarry, because pain disrupts the connection of the body's internal state to the external world. She identifies the human urge to 'bind' its internal psyche to objects in the outside world (1985:162). By grounding with shared experiences, images and objects, humans can share experiences. Pain is detrimental because it disrupts this process. Imagination acts as a 'ground of last resort' for a body in pain to ground itself in the physical, relatable social world (ibid.: 166).

Imagination further transforms a body's experience of pain because it alters the framing:

In isolation, pain intends nothing, it is wholly passive, it is suffered rather than willed or directed. Pain only becomes an intentional state once it is brought into relation with the objectifying power of the imagination. Pain is transformed from a wholly passive and helpless occurrence into a self modifying one. (ibid.: 164)

She asserts that 'Pain and imagining are 'framing events' within whose boundaries all other perceptual, somatic, and emotional events occur; 'thus between the two extremes can be mapped the whole terrain of the human psyche' (ibid.: 165).

Although Scarry highlights the crucial connections between imagination, pain and bodily framing experiences, she polarises the constructs of pain and imagination, choosing to define them as opposites. By doing so, she misses the chance to explore a more organic relationship between these and the ways in which the individual may use their connections to interact with others. In the next selected work, Byron Good develops the body's use of imagination as a tool to remake social connections and self-framing.

Good mines Scarry's model to new purposes in his 'A Body in Pain' (1992). For Good, creativity serves as the only way a body in pain can bridge internal experiences to form social connections. A body in pain uses language to explain pain creatively, make social connections and create meaning. To demonstrate this, Good uses an ethnography of a chronic pain patient to argue that creativity in both language and art can be used to connect to others. He interprets a four-hour conversation with a young man, 'Brian', with chronic pain caused by TMJ. Unlike Scarry, he argues that pain is highly verbal. Pain shaped Brian's world (Good 1992: 36), so there is none of Scarry's 'shattering of language through pain'. Good observed: 'For many patients, language is anything but shattered in this literal sense. Brian was wonderfully and frighteningly articulate' (Good 1992: 35). By using creative idioms and language, Brian is able to connect socially with the world around him.

Brian uses multiple narratives and symbolism to frame the pain conceptually, or as Scarry puts it, to 'objectify' it. At the start of the interview Brian gave a specific diagnosis for his chronic pain (TMJ), but the description of his pain and its history 'quickly eluded ordered characterisation, spilling out into his own life' (Good 1992: 162). Imagination allows Brian to explore the connection between his emotional state, his psyche and his body. This is demonstrated through the cyclical framing of the question 'Is it my body? Is it my thinking process that activates physical stresses?...Or is it the other way around?' (ibid.: 35) Brian uses creative narratives to understand his own pain. Objectifying the pain created some relief for Brian: '...I actually had some clear image ... I knew what it was. I wasn't groping in the dark. It wasn't ambiguous anymore. It wasn't a whole lot of things' (ibid.: 34). However, Brian often failed in his attempts to objectify the pain. He created many possible alternatives, which ranged from dizzy spells to depression, nausea, anxiety attacks, heart palpitations and sensations of weakness. This uncertainty 'threatened the objective structure of the everyday world in which Brian participates' (ibid.: 36). Similarly, Good identifies this search in many chronic pain sufferers. 'Chronic pain sufferers ... constantly seek a name for their suffering, an image that will name its source and allow it to be set off from the self, an image that will provide the symbolic structure for the remaking of the world' (ibid.: 43). He goes on to ask, 'Is the pain an essential part of the self, or merely a part of the body?' (ibid.: 45).

As well as finding a way to frame the pain creatively for himself, Brian uses creative language and imagery to describe the pain to others and to form social connections. This shows how the body is social and uses imagination to share the experience of pain. In the interview, Brian uses creative language and images in an attempt to explain the slippery world of pain to Good. Brian used imagery: '...it would seem as though there, there, there's a,

ah, ama, a demon, a monster, something horrible lurking around banging the insides of my body, ripping it apart' (Good 1992: 36). He noted: 'pain streaks throughout the body like lightening' (ibid.: 38).

Brian is an artist who uses painting as a form of creativity to express and communicate his pain. However, he is hesitant to share his works for fear of social rejection. This supports the body's social need: 'yeah...I have to know if they will be accepted...if I reveal something about myself...it will be likely to be met with scepticism or mockery. I can't show ordinary people...' (Good 1992: 47). Brian's creativity is a way to mediate interactions between his experience of pain and others who cannot feel it. Brian uses his imagination to provide a small point of access to a world of pain which cannot be measured through biological markers or lesions.

Throop's (2008) *From Pain to Virtue: Dysphoric Sensations and Moral Sensibilities in Yap* offers the platform whereby Good's connection of creativity, pain and sociality is expanded into a cultural context. By objectifying pain through the imagination, the Yapese are able to form meaningful socio-cultural connections from pain. For Throop, the body is social and craves individual, intrapersonal and cultural connections. Pain is creatively viewed as culturally embodied experience influenced by the sufferer's moral framework. Thus pain is transformed from an isolating experience, as described by Scarry and Good, into a socially integrating one.

Throop, who conducted an ethnographic analysis of the people of the Micronesian island of Yap, was able to demonstrate that pain is influenced by creative moral and cultural framing. Many people suffer from a local illness categorized as *maath'keenil* ('Severed Spine'). This covers a broad range of illnesses and symptoms, linked to hard physical labour. Individuals refer to their pain with the personified phrase, 'pain came to me'. The pain is objectified, made tangible, separable, from the self who suffers. Yapese social theory and ethics are interconnected models of ethical subjectivity and virtuous comportment which alter the meaning of pain (Throop 2008: 264). The personal experience of pain cannot be separated from Yapese cultural logics and moral sensibilities. When asked where his pain came from, a 64-year-old man suffering from *maath'keenil* attributed his pain to '...hard work I put in long ago when I was a child.' Through this social framing of pain, the Yapese turn pain from a sign of dysfunction or disability into a sign of merit earned by working hard for family members and the wider group. Pain is transformed from suffering to a symbol of dedication and love.

Discussion

Unlike easily identified sources of pain, like a severed arm or a sore tooth, not all forms of pain necessarily have an identifiable internal or external tissue marker. Biology does not provide all the answers to the questions surrounding the body; anthropology weaves a valuable conceptual web and provides creative insights to the inner workings of the body. Chronic pain is bounded by sensation, resistant to documentation by biomedicine, which makes its study by anthropologists valuable because their examination can capture its sensations, affect and social effects. This essay has used anthropological approaches to pain to demonstrate that the body is social. The body in pain uses imagination and creativity to frame the psyche, form social connections and make meaning. It further shows that the body can create meaning that transforms pain from being an isolating experience, laden with shame, depression and fear, into a source of pride. Thus pain is transformed from affliction to purpose.

References

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