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The Effects of Ritual Healing on Female Victims of Abuse: A Study of Empowerment and Transformation

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This research analyzes the effects of ritual healing on women who have been victims of abuse, including incest, rape, and battering. The study was conducted through participant observation of a women's spirituality group. The focus of the analysis is on the process of empowerment as it is experienced in a ritual context that provides a means for cathartic expression as well as participant identification with female symbols of power. The findings of this study suggest that women-centered rituals are effective in reducing fear, releasing anger, increasing one's sense of power, and improving the overall mental health of those who have experienced the trauma of victimization.

The study of spiritual healing in the United States has become an increasingly significant area of research, as the phenomenon of psychic healing has become more widespread. Traditionally, the study of spiritual healing is most frequently associated with cross-cultural investigations into shamanism and ritual practices of non-Western cultures (Eliade, 1964). With the rise of new religious movements in the West, however, the last two decades have witnessed the proliferation of contemporary ritualistic practices that have as their objective the healing of individuals as well as the healing of society as a whole (Beckford, 1984). Thus, McGuire reports that "nonmedical forms of healing are actually rather widespread among educated, fully acculturated, and economically secure persons" in the United States (1983:221). This view is corroborated by Torrey (1975) and LeShan (1975), both of whom have conducted investigations into psychic healing from the perspective of traditional psychiatry and psychotherapy.

The growing interest in contemporary forms of spiritual revivalism and psychic healing provides a framework in which to consider the healing dimension of women's spirituality. As both traditional (Ruether, 1985) and nontraditional (Starhawk, 1982) feminist theologians redefine and reconceptualize notions of religious experience, ideology, and spiritual identification, these efforts at reconstructing female spirituality have been incorporated in a movement toward self-healing. This trend in women's spirituality has emerged through the creation of women-centered rituals that are designed to provide women with a means to bond with one another while exploring images of female strength derived from ancient symbols of the goddess.

In this regard, the women's spirituality movement has adopted a holistic approach to healing consistent with other New Age philosophies that are geared toward self-growth and personal empowerment. What is unique to the women's healing movement, however, is the female-centered ritual in which healing becomes the responsibility of women, as the symbol of the goddess represents the acknowledgment of the legitimacy of independent female power (Christ, 1982).

In order to explore more fully the phenomenon of spiritual healing as it is manifested in the rise of women's spirituality, the goal of this research is to study the therapeutic value of healing rituals for women who have been victims of male violence. More specifically, the focus of the investigation is on the process of empowerment as it is experienced through the ritual context. Research into female victimization suggests that women who have been physically and sexually abused retain feelings of helplessness and powerlessness as a result of the abuse (Burgess and Holmstrom, 1974). Healing rituals which are centered around images and values associated with female strength thus offer a means to study the nature of empowerment and its effect on transforming socially constructed definitions of self. To this end, the goal of the research is to investigate the process of empowerment with respect to the transformative qualities of spiritual healing.

The paper is organized into four sections. The first section describes the methods of the study and the characteristics of a healing ritual as performed by a women's spirituality group. The second section reports the findings of the research with regard to the effects of catharsis and transformation on victims of abuse. A discussion of these findings is elaborated in the third section, which focuses on the nature of ritual from a social-psychological perspective. The concluding section summarizes the objectives and findings of the study, placing this form of spiritual healing in the context of other healing movements.

METHODS AND RITUAL SETTING

The sample for the study consists of twenty-five women each of whom had been a victim of abuse and thus sought healing through affiliation with a women's spirituality group. The participants ranged in age from twenty-two to thirty-eight. Five of the women were incest victims, eight were rape victims, five had been battered, and seven reported experiences of psychological abuse. In two of the cases of incest, rape had also occurred. Among the participants, eleven of the women had been or were currently in psychotherapy, six had been involved in support groups for victims of abuse, and eight had never sought any form of therapy prior to joining the women's spirituality group. The fact that the majority of women in the study had sought clinical treatment is consistent with McGuire's (1983) findings. In her study of alternative healing for physiological ailments, McGuire found that most of the respondents used both medical and non-medical means to heal themselves and that spiritual alternatives were not chosen exclusively.

Membership in the women's spirituality group was primarily derived from students and instructors at the University of Colorado in Boulder, the majority of whom had developed a feminist perspective on victimization in which their individual experiences

were understood in context of the larger social phenomenon of violence against women. As such, the group met for a period of a year for the purpose of participating in women-centered rituals, six of which were devoted to healing victims of abuse. The other rituals focused around traditional solstice celebrations throughout the twelve month cycle.

The structure of the group was nonhierarchical. Consistent with a feminist approach to organization, leadership was shared among a core group of students who arranged the time and place for the group to meet. Although membership was not regulated in any formalized manner, attendance at the rituals was fairly consistent. Eight of the women attended five or more rituals, six attended three or four rituals, and ten attended at least two rituals. Further, although the group defined itself as a female spirituality group, few of the women identified themselves as pagan, neopagan, or Wiccan adherents. Rather than label themselves as affiliated with a particular female-centered tradition, the majority of participants reported that they subscribed to a loosely defined belief system in which the notion of the goddess was meaningful both as a symbol of female divinity and as an image of female strength and power. As such, the women expressed a desire to become involved in women's spirituality in order to experience the goddess as an integral part of themselves. As one participant described this objective, "I want to know my own power, to discover my spiritual identity through connection to other women and to the symbol of the divine in the image of the female."

The healing ritual was organized into three separate acts of participation, each of which was preceded by invocations to the goddess and a chant that affirmed women's strength and solidarity. The first part of the ritual involved an acknowledgment of victimization. This was accomplished as each woman wrote the nature of her abuse on a piece of paper and then read the words out loud as she tossed the paper into a raging fire. The second act of the ritual was geared toward the release of anger. Here the women wrote the name of the perpetrator on an egg which was then smashed against the floor while the name of the abuser was shouted out to the group. In the final portion of the ritual, one of the women led the others through a guided meditation in which the participants were asked to envision themselves in the form of the goddess that was meaningful to them. As the goddess, the women would then be told to confront the abuser in an act of strength and through the act of direct confrontation to experience the goddess as individual and personal power. Following the guided meditation, the ritual ended, although the women tended to remain in the circle where they talked quietly with one another about the feelings that had been raised during the healing rite.

Three methods of data collection were used to assess the effect of the rituals. The first involved participant observation through which data were collected on the ritual process and the immediate response to the healing rituals as observed by the researcher. The second phase of data gathering involved the completion of written questionnaires by group members who were asked to respond to both closed-ended and open-ended questions concerning the ritual experience. The survey data provided background information on the respondents as well as a self-report assessment of the impact of ritual healing with respect to the trauma of victimization. In addition to the written questionnaires, intensive interviews were conducted with a randomly selected group of

six women in order to gather in-depth information on the process of healing and the effects of ritual on the psychological wellbeing of group members. The interview schedule included ten questions that probed the respondent's attitudes toward spirituality, her goals for participating in the healing rites, and her understanding of the most meaningful aspect of the ritual. The intensive interviews were taped and then transcribed. Both the written questionnaires and the oral interviews were completed at three and six month intervals to evaluate the long-term effects of participation in the women's spirituality group.

FINDINGS

According to the survey data collected through the questionnaires, the respondents reported that the ritual was particularly effective in reducing fear, releasing anger, increasing one's sense of power, and improving the overall mental health of the participant with respect to the trauma of victimization. In contrast to these findings, the ritual had little impact on attitudes toward forgiveness. Table 1 summarizes these results. As this table indicates, almost all of the respondents (17) reported an increased sense of personal power as a result of their participation in the rituals and an improved mental health outlook with respect to their victimization. In a further analysis of data, the study revealed that the process of personal empowerment results from experiencing the ritual both as a cathartic form of therapy and as a transformative act of consciousness in which the women perceive themselves as more powerful than the abuser. Each of these aspects of ritual healing will be elaborated below.

TABLE 1

THE EFFECTS OF RITUAL HEALING ON VICTIMS OF ABUSE

	Percent of Victims	
Effects	Percent	N
Reduction of Fear	40	10
Reduction of Anger	60	15
Reduction of Emotional Pain	60	15
Receptivity to Forgiveness	8	2
Increased Sense of Power	73	18
Improved Mental Health	76	19

The Healing Rite as Catharsis

The relationship between ritual and catharsis has been investigated by Scheff (1979), who has identified three elements of cathartic ritual. These include shared emotional distress; the act of emotional distancing, through which individuals both participate in and observe emotional release; and the discharge of emotion. Each of these components is present in the healing ritual practiced by the women in the spirituality group. A fourth component, that of social bonding, is also present in the ritual and

provides the social structure through which the release of emotion is expressed, supported, and validated.

The cathartic quality of the women's healing rite is evident in the release of emotion that accompanies the public disclosure of victimization and the ritualized sharing of anger that follows the confessional act. The first phase of the ritual, the public acknowledgment of abuse, lays the foundation for developing ties to other women as each of the participants shares her grief openly and in so doing becomes aware of the pain and humiliation of others. As one woman described these feelings of connectedness:

> The sharing aspect is one of the most powerful parts of the ritual. We share things with one another that we never share in any other way. It is also the most painful part of the ritual. When I share about my rape and someone else shares about their battering or their father, I can identify with their pain as well.

The identification with other women through the public admission of victimization reduces the sense of isolation that victims often experience. As each individual at the ritual acknowledges what has happened to her, the universality of female victimization becomes apparent. This recognition of shared suffering seems to be particularly significant in that women who have been victimized often feel a sense of guilt and responsibility for the attacks of violence against them (Burgess and Holmstrom, 1974). As such, their victimization often assumes the attributes of sin in our society where incest, rape, and battering becomes a source of shame, self-doubt, and self-hatred. Thus, as the women relieve themselves of the burden of shame and secrecy, the healing rite takes on the characteristics of a public confession similar to the tribal confessional rites described by LeBarre (1964). A woman who had been severely battered explained the process of bonding through disclosure in this way:

> It was with wonder and amazement that we could all connect with each other and be honest with each other. Tell what we never told anyone else. . . . I grew up thinking that women were my enemy. It took me a long time to understand that I had a lot in common with other women, that my mistrust had been misplaced, that I could trust this group with my abusive past and there would be lots of acceptance and comfort.

While the acknowledgment of victimization focuses the emotional distress of the group, the second phase of the ritual, the egg-smashing rite, intensifies the catharsis through a discharge of emotion that involves the participant in an act of directed rage. As such, the symbolic smashing of the egg and the attendant releasing of emotion is perhaps the most provocative act of the healing rite. It is that moment in the ritual where participants become aware of a perceptible change in the emotional climate of the group. The breaking of the egg involves a physical expression of anger that is accompanied by the verbal attacks on the perpetrator. The effect on the group is an increased sense of awareness around the feelings of rage associated with physical and sexual assault. A rape victim describes the group process in this manner:

> When we threw the eggs and shouted I felt my own anger come to the surface so strongly, so immediately there, and I was crying and I could see it there, coming with the other

> women too, and it felt like something you could reach out and touch, a really charged atmosphere. I could see this other woman's pain and feel the similarity between her pain and mine. . . . I guess there were two elements there, feeling the anger, feeling it come to the surface so quickly, and feeling in the larger sense that this is something all women have, that we all need to get out, that we all need to process.

The release of anger in the ritual context impacts the participants in two significant ways. The first is that the ritual provides a social structure in which to experience intense emotions that, given the cultural norm of repression, are rarely validated outside the ritual setting. The second effect of the ritual is that the group provides a safe place for women to express feelings of anger without fear of hurting others or doing harm to themselves. Each of these aspects of catharsis will be discussed separately.

With respect to norms of repression, the outward expression of rage embodied by the ritual reverses the tendency to internalize and repress anger. This would seem to be particularly significant in view of research on emotion and social conditioning (Scheff, 1979; Tavris, 1982; Hochschild, 1983). Studies of emotion in Western culture strongly suggest that the expression of feeling is in part a socially learned response that is gender defined. Scheff, for example, makes the point that children quickly learn the social rules associated with male and female emotional expression, as boys learn to repress tears, grief, and sadness, while girls learn to repress anger. Similarly, Tavris reports that laboratory studies indicate that anger is a learned rather than instinctual response for women when confronted with insult or injury. In citing an experiment in which women were rewarded for aggressive behavior, Tavris relates that "women showed catharsis-like reduction in blood pressure when they responded aggressively and had a slow vascular recovery when they were friendly" (1983:126).[1]

The prevailing psychological literature (Lerman, 1979; Rieker and Carmen, 1986; Sayers, 1986) supports the therapeutic value of validating female anger, especially in response to victimization. Such validation has the twofold effect of releasing emotion while increasing the victim's sense of personal power and competency. Accordingly, Rieker and Carmen emphasize the importance of claiming anger under circumstances of victimization. In their work with abused women, they describe the problems associated with anger and repression in relation to the rape victim:

> When the victim can speak again, she is likely to focus on her pain and sorrow; her rage, which she fears as a potentially dangerous and destructive force, is suppressed and remains out of conscious awareness. Perhaps at a time when she feels safe, she can risk allowing her anger to surface. It is important to keep in mind that inability to claim one's anger often jeopardizes a victim's subsequent recovery (1986:363).

Confronting anger in self and others in a ritualized context appears to provide the safe environment necessary for the arousal of emotion. This distancing aspect of ritual, as identified by Scheff, allows the participant/observer to experience repressed emotion and then to discharge it within a structured setting. As members of the group see their own rage reflected in the behavior of others, the ritual provides a means

[1]In the same experimental situation, men experienced catharsis as a result of friendliness rather than belligerence.

for participants to become aware of and engaged in their own feelings. A case in point is a respondent who had been both raped and battered in an intimate relationship. As she reported her response to the ritual, she spoke of her inability to feel anger at the perpetrator:

> I still cannot get angry at this man. I can't imagine myself hurting him or doing anything like that. During the ritual, I could not direct my anger at him specifically. I picked up the anger of the other group members and in experiencing their anger, got closer to my own. The ritual helped me get in touch with my anger. For me just to feel anger and not to hurt anyone is very positive.

The security of being able to feel rage and yet not vent these feelings in a harmful way is the second way in which the healing ritual seemed to have a significant impact on the group members. Many of the women expressed fear about allowing themselves to feel such intense emotions that might lead to hurting others or themselves. The egg, therefore, had special importance as it could be destroyed with impunity. Some women reported that smashing the egg was a wonderful freeing experience, while others enjoyed the sheer power of watching the fragile object explode against the ground.

Their responses to the active discharge of angry feelings are in keeping with Konečni's (1975) studies of aggression in which he categorized those conditions that lead to catharsis as a result of aggressive retaliation. According to Konečni's investigations, total catharsis is experienced when retaliation is directed at the person who deserves blame, when the method of retaliation inflicts harm on the source of rage, and when the perpetrator cannot in turn harm the victim again. Although such circumstances represent the ideal situation under which catharsis may be experienced, these three conditions rarely exist in tandem outside the laboratory. The ritual therefore offers an arena wherein cathartic retaliation can be symbolically enacted.

Within the structure provided by the rite, the egg becomes the symbolic perpetrator, as the act of smashing assumes the quality of aggression without fear of retaliation. Further, because the egg can be destroyed guiltlessly, aggressive behavior can be discharged without the interference of social controls that ordinarily inhibit acts of anger and intentional harm. In this way, the egg smashing ritual violates what Hochschild refers to as "feeling rules," those constraints on behavior that result from social arrangements which "define what we should feel in various circumstances" (1983:289). Normative proscriptions dictate that even in situations of victimization, aggression and anger are inappropriate reactions for women, although these emotional responses are clearly therapeutic in healing victims of abuse.

The cathartic value of ritualized aggression is especially apparent in those respondents who had been involved in traditional psychotherapy. In comparing therapy with participation in the ritual, the women reported that the issue of anger in particular had been more adequately addressed through the ritual. A rape victim explained the differences in this way:

> In therapy I would always go in and talk to this woman. I talked about feeling angry at a particular man and she would say, "so imagine this pillow is that man and talk to him." There was no way in hell I could look at this pillow and try to tell it my feelings. It is

> so much easier for me to intellectualize about it. But in the ritual it was immediate. The anger was right there just from throwing the egg and releasing it. In the ritual people just let the anger fly.

The impact of active catharsis, as described by the respondent, is discussed in Scheff's critique of Freudian-based psychotherapy. In his analysis of Freud's technique of catharsis ("the talking cure"), he maintains that Freud's approach is inadequate because it fails to address the active release of emotion:

> Freud and Breuer's technique of cathartic therapy has been evaluated in the light of a new and explicit theory of catharsis. The evaluation suggests that their technique was critically flawed: they believed that a single verbal description of a memory of a trauma constituted a sufficient reaction. From the point of view of the new theory, such a technique would usually be insufficient, discharging only one component, boredom, if that. What is needed is a repeated emotional discharge of fear, grief, anger, and so on, during a properly distanced reexperiencing of a traumatic scene (1979:79).

In effect, the ritual offers a means to reexperience the trauma in a safe environment that provides the distancing necessary for the reenactment of rage and sorrow by the victim.

In summary, the cathartic quality of the ritual is felt through the public act of confession and the release of anger, as these are experienced in relation to the other women participants. Further, as the healing ritual legitimizes the feelings of rage associated with victimization, participants experience a "return of power" that is then reinforced through the final ritual act, the guided meditation, in which women image female visions of strength.

The Transformative Function of Ritual Healing

The concept of transformation as it applies to ritual healing refers to the process whereby individuals experience a change in consciousness that reflects an improved and more healthy image of self. According to McGuire, the transformative aspects of ritual are embodied in the language and imagery of ritual acts and ritual words:

> Another feature of ritual language which is effective in the healing process is the ability to represent at one level of meaning, realities at other levels of meaning. Specifically, ritual words' metaphoric and metanymic operations enable them to work at multiple levels in people's lives. Metaphorical usage of ritual words place them as surrogates, having reference both to the original object and to some additional symbolic object (1983:230-31).

In the women's spirituality group, the language of transformation was expressed through the imagery of guided meditation. Through this visioning process, the symbol of the goddess became the metaphor of power through which the women experienced themselves as strong and aggressive. Unlike the cathartic aspects of the ritual, however, the guided meditation did not empower the women through a shared consciousness of victimization but through an individualized transformation that allowed each of the participants to identify with a personal image of female strength and power.

Because of the more individualized and personal nature of transformation, the respondents reported a variety of transformative images that emerged during the ritual. Accordingly, some of the women envisioned themselves as goddesses of antiquity such as Artemis or Erishkigal, while others saw themselves as animals or superhuman forms in their own image. Similarly, the method of confrontation varied with each respondent as a small number of women chose violent retribution while others were less aggressive in their confrontational approach. Despite these differences, however, the characteristics of the transformative images can be classified into two categories, that of the active avenger and that of the goddess as accuser.

In keeping with traditional sex role socialization patterns in which aggression, like anger, is rarely validated as appropriate female behavior, only 20 percent of the respondents reported images of active aggression. Typical of these was the rape and incest victim who, in the form of an eagle, attacked her abuser: "I was an eagle and I saw him in front of me and I just flew at him and plucked out his eyes and plucked out his heart. It was my rapist. It was him. It started out with incest perpetrators but then it became my rapist." What is significant about this vision is that not only was the woman transformed into an object of power but the identity of the abuser changed as well, first assuming the image of an anonymous perpetrator before becoming the actual person responsible for the victimization. For the other women this progression toward specificity was also evident, although the change was more likely to occur from one ritual to the next rather than during the same guided meditation. Further, the women who confronted the actual perpetrator rather than an unidentified abuser reported greater reduction of fear and powerlessness surrounding their abusive experiences.

In contrast to the active aggressor vision, the goddess as accuser was a much more common imagery, representing close to 80 percent of the visions that emerged during the guided meditation. Here transformationn was achieved through personal identification with female images of superhuman strength and size who, rather than attack their abusers, stood before them or merely walked away, leaving the diminished perpetrator behind. Two cases in particular illustrate this transformative process. The first is that of a battered woman who experienced herself as large and overpowering during the guided meditation:

> The most healing aspect of the ritual was that I experienced myself very big. I felt huge. I experienced a sense of largeness and power. I became so big, the person could never touch me. I never struck out at the person, but my size was overpowering. My hugeness had the reverse effect that his hugeness had had on me.

The second case is that of a woman who had been battered in marriage and whose two sons had also been abused by her husband. During the guided meditation the image of the goddess shifted from the image of her own mother to a visualization of herself as a powerful female figure. Here she describes the transformation:

> The first image was my mother or someone very much like her. Someone very nurturing, older, with the wisdom of experience. It wasn't anything like a Greek goddess, that just didn't have reality for me. What I was was someone earthy with lots of varied experience

> and human expressions. In the second confrontation, I imagined myself more as myself, but larger than life and dark skinned. I didn't react to the children's father in the vision. I just watched him. It was confrontation without confrontation. I thought, just stand there and accuse without accusing. The time will come that you will pay for this. That's the cycle of things.

This visualization in particular is suggestive of religious rituals in which the curative process involves the symbolic merger of child with mother through the invocation of a "numinous" (powerful). In Westley's view (1983), the spiritual symbol systems recreate the mother-child bond through a process of ritualistic transference similar to the transference that takes place in a client-therapist relationship. As Westley's theory applies to female spirituality, the invocation of the goddess would be especially significant as the numinous presence embodies a female spiritual imagery with whom the participant merges during the healing ritual. In the visualization described here, the participant images her mother as self in the form of a powerful female figure, thus recasting the goddess symbology in terms of the actual mother-daughter bond.

One other interesting finding with respect to the imagery of the visualizations was that the more aggressive confrontations were correlated with age rather than the nature of victimization. Regardless of the severity of the abuse, the younger women were more reluctant to associate themselves with the goddess as female avenger. Rather, they spoke of the need for another kind of power, as one university student explained:

> The imaging was hard for me. It was sometimes difficult to come up with an image. What I pictured was a woman looking like Botticelli's Venus, and I remember thinking she doesn't look very strong. I think she should be heftier. But she confronted my father, standing naked in front of him. She didn't do anything violent. She just was able to turn her back on him and walk away, and that was real powerful. But I thought maybe I should give her a bow and arrow like Artemis, but then I don't want her to do anything violent, not like the male culture. We want to be different from them, not use the same type of violence.

This woman's response was characteristic of the younger women in the study who sought to separate themselves from images of violence that were perceived to be an expression of masculine behavior. The older women, while more willing to conceive and execute images of violence, nevertheless reported that they were not always comfortable with an image of themselves as the violent aggressor. In the ritual context, it was stressed that the boundaries of the guided meditation made it possible to envision female acts of aggression without fear that this behavior would be actualized outside the confines of the meditative experience.

The concept of a ritualized role reversal, in which the victim becomes the more powerful actor during a religious ceremony, can be compared to status reversal rituals such as those practiced in the "feast of love festivals" in India (Turner, 1969). In these rituals, the women and men participate in a role reversal performance in which women actually chase and subdue men. A symbolic exchange of power thus takes place that provides a means for women to experience themselves as the more powerful members of the group, if only in the context of ritual. Similarly, the guided meditation during the women's healing ritual would seem to empower the participants through the same

kind of symbolic demonstration of female strength, a conditional state of power that is clearly limited by the boundaries of the ritual.

The role reversal that takes place in the guided meditation becomes a form of healing in much the same way that dreams become a source of healing for women suffering from rape trauma syndrome. In studies of rape victims, researchers report (Burgess and Holmstrom, 1974) that through dreams a rape victim may experience mastery over the perpetrator. In these cases, the content of the dream often reflects a violent scenario in which the victim sees herself killing or stabbing the abuser. Hagerman thus draws a parallel between dream therapy and ritual therapy, maintaining that dreams, like rituals, "untape the symbolic content of the mind" (in Shaffer, 1982:465).

With respect to the relationship between rituals and dreams, a number of women in the spirituality group reported that the content of their dreams seemed to be affected by the guided meditation. For example, one woman reported that during the ritual she pictured herself as the goddess Erishkigal standing over her attacker with a knife. A few nights later she dreamed that she actually stabbed the attacker, killing him. Following this dream of mastery over her rapist, she reported that her nightmares became much less frequent. The transformative aspects of the healing ritual are therefore expressed in imagery and language that may be incorporated at various levels of the psyche, affecting both dream content and rational consciousness.

As a process of creative visualization, the guided meditation contains universal elements of symbolic healing as identified by Dow (1986). Through the scenario of confrontation imaged by the participant, a myth of strength is created that provides transactional symbols that are manipulated to redefine the roles of victim and abuser. This myth, as it is internalized by the participant, contributes to a redefinition of self which Csordas describes as the ritual transformation that occurs "when the supplicant is persuaded to change basic cognitive, affective, and behavioral patterns" (1983:357). Follow-up interviews at intervals of three and six months indicated that, for half the respondents (13), feelings of empowerment lasted for more than a few weeks. Table 2 summarizes the effects of empowerment over time. For eight of the women, the feelings of empowerment lasted over a month, while five of the women reported that in times of stress they continue to call on the images of female strength that had been envisioned during the guided meditation. One woman explained the long term effects in this way:

> Now the first sign of energy when I do my own rituals is that I feel big. I just start to grow. I know it has helped me outside the ritual because for the first time in years, I have some friends who are men who are big and for a long time I had only men friends who were physically smaller than myself.

An important point to consider with respect to the effects of ritual on cognitive reconstruction and long-term healing is the need for reinforcement. A significant concern that arose for the women in this study was the desire to experience the feeling of empowerment on an ongoing basis. The follow-up interviews with the respondents indicated that regular participation in the rituals was seen as necessary to sustain the effects of transformation. These findings suggest that spiritual empowerment may involve

TABLE 2

THE EFFECTS OF EMPOWERMENT OVER TIME

Time Period	Sustained Feelings of Empowerment	
	Percent	N
At the Ritual Only	12	3
Over a Few Days	16	4
Over a Week	20	5
Over a Month	32	8
Over a Few Months	20	5

a process in which continual reinforcement is sought with the hope of regaining the sense of personal power exclusively associated with ritual practice. The fact that over half the respondents (14) attended more than three rituals suggests the desirability of repeating transformative experiences. This finding also helps to explain sustained commitment to faith healing movements which rely on ritualized transformation as a source of achieving spiritual and psychological wellbeing.

DISCUSSION

The study presented here raises a number of important questions concerning the value and effect of ritual healing in contemporary Western culture. As suggested earlier, it is Scheff's contention that ritual healing provides a more comprehensive approach to psychic curing in that ritual allows participants to experience emotion and to realize deep-seated feelings, in contrast to more traditional therapeutic approaches which provide little in the way of emotional discharge. Further, Scheff contends that it is precisely the emotional aspects of ritual which are of greatest importance to a society that, as a whole, represses emotion. In this regard Scheff writes:

> I believe that the de-emphasis of emotion found in the work of Malinowski, later Freud, Geertz, and other social theorists is part of a rationalistic bias which gives undue emphasis to cognitive elements. Such a perspective is also ethnocentric, since it derogates that aspect of ritual which Western culture effectively deals with through knowledge and science, and ignores that part — emotion — which our culture handles poorly if at all (1979:115).

Cathartic rituals, such as the healing rite studied here, raise the emotional consciousness of those who participate, providing an outlet for emotional responses in a society that is prone to repression and denial. Further, the value of ritual is evident in the creation of solidarity among those who are participating in the public expression of feelings. Within the confines of the women's spirituality group, a sense of community is developed that offers a support system for those experiencing emotional pain in their lives. Such "collective catharsis," maintains Scheff, "gives rise to extremely powerful forces of cohesion and group solidarity" (1979:53).

For victims of abuse, the effects of group solidarity contribute to improved self-esteem through the affirmation of collective injury that reduces the tendency toward

self-blame. Research on victimization (Brody, 1984) indicates that self-blame may be both beneficial and detrimental to the recovery of victims. If in blaming one's self a victim believes that she might avoid future harm through a greater awareness of danger, then she experiences a sense of control over her life which can be empowering. If, however, a woman believes that she is in fact responsible for her own victimization, which is often the case in battering and sexual abuse, then personal blame results in self-hatred, lowered self-esteem, and depression (Ballou and Gabalac, 1985). Thus, in considering the literature on the positive effects of self-blame, an important distinction must be made between self-awareness (avoiding future abusive situations) and self-denigration that justifies the actions of the abuser.

In collectively labeling, identifying, and punishing the perpetrator, the women's healing ritual directs responsibility for the abusive behavior away from the victim and thus helps to diffuse the guilt and self-hatred associated with victimization. As such, definitively establishing the victimizer role of the perpetrator contributes to a redefinition of self that absolves the participant from feelings of worthlessness and wrong doing. This cathartic moment in the ritual is further enhanced by the effects of a visualization that casts the victim in the role of the accuser and more powerful actor. The final phase of the ritual, transformative imaging, therefore contributes to a reconstruction of self which furthers the process of personal empowerment.

The intervention of the goddess symbol during visualization points to the significant relationship between images of personal power, gender, and spiritual symbolism. Clearly one objective of the women's spirituality movement is to reconceptualize god in terms that are not male defined, thus providing women with a legitimate source of power in the spiritual realm that can be internalized as a personal identification with strength. In the ritual, this goal is accomplished through a visualization of goddess as self, as the healing context is female-oriented and self-directed rather than male-centered and other-dependent. On both a social and psychological level, the female-centered healing ritual therefore offers insight into the social construction of spirituality and the effects of gender-defined symbols on individual perceptions of power and dependency.

More specifically, a significant point to consider is the way in which the women's healing movement differs from other faith healing alternatives such as those described by Csordas, which rely on the visualization of Jesus in reconstructing the participant's life. Although various approaches to ritual healing share certain similarities in structure and form as described earlier, the gender of the rhetorical symbol used in the healing rite impacts the curative process in very specific ways. This would be especially true for women whose powerlessness is associated with male perpetrated violence. The visualization of female power redefines notions of gender and dominance as the strength of the feminine is reflected in a female spiritual symbol. The feminization of spiritual imagery during the ritual is empowering precisely because the victim does not rely on masculine concepts of spiritual strength in order to heal herself. The conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that gendered symbols affect spiritual consciousness through a reconstruction of personal power.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research has been to investigate the phenomenon of spiritual healing through the ritual practices of a woman's spirituality group. More specifically, the goals of the study have been to assess the effect of spiritual healing on victims of abuse and to explore the process of empowerment as it relates to female victimization. The results of the study indicate that women who participate in women-centered healing rituals experience a cathartic release of emotion as a result of the public act of confession and the communal expression of anger. The therapeutic value of this catharsis is enhanced by the transformative functions of ritual through which women experience mastery as a result of identification with images of female power and strength. The symbol of the goddess therefore becomes integrated into the consciousness of the participant, contributing to a redefinition of self as powerful actor rather than helpless victim.

In placing this study within the larger context of research on ritual practice and healing in contemporary society, it is apparent that the healing aspect of women's spirituality is consistent with other alternative movements, such as human potential and metaphysical groups that have as their objective the development of personal strength and individual protective mechanisms to help group members cope with the harsh realities of modern life. So too, the adoption of the goddess and the integration of this symbol into the consciousness of women is intended to provide the "self protective armor" (Bird, 1978) necessary for personal transformation. As an alternative healing form, the women's spirituality group appears to be an effective arena in which to address issues relevant to female victimization. Feelings of fear, helplessness, and powerlessness appear to lessen as the ideology of self-healing is manifested in a spiritual cosmology that validates notions of independent female power. What remains unclear from the research, however, is the extent to which ritual healing has long-term effects. A valuable area of future research would therefore be to investigate the need for reinforcement and repeated acts of empowerment in order to sustain the therapeutic value of spiritual healing.

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