Author: Adams, Glyn

Affiliation: Centre for the Study of Health, Sickness and Disablement, Brunel University, UK

Source: Anthropology & Medicine (ANTHROPOL MED),

2002 Dec; 9 (3): 245-65.

Abstract:

In this paper, globalisation processes are examined through the prism of shiatsu, an originally Japanese, touch-based therapy, now practised in Europe, Japan, North America, and many other places. Examining this emergent plane of therapeutic practice provides an opportunity to reflect on categories of personhood, notably that of the individual, and its place within processes of globalisation. The article is divided into two parts. In the first part the holisms inherent to East Asian medical practice and underlying notions of personhood in Japan and Britain are critically examined. The seemingly reductionistic practice of 'bodily holism' in Japan is shown to reflect socio-centred notions of the person. The concept of holism animating shiatsu in a British school in London, far from being Japanese, 'ancient', or 'timeless', is shown to reflect individualism characteristic of the New Age movement. In the second part of the paper, using an auto-phenomenological approach, a description of practitioner (my own) and client's lived experience of shiatsu is given in case study form. This illustrates how 'holism' is felt within the context of a shiatsu treatment. The aesthetic form of the shiatsu touch described is shown to be implicitly individualising. This has, it is argued, profound implications for understanding the embodied dimensions of practitioner-patient encounters, the potential efficacy of treatment, and more generally the practice of globalised East Asian 'holistic' therapies in Britain and other settings.