

Psychology as Medicine

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Abstract: Drawing from the fields of surgical oncology, obstetrics and gynecology, epigenetics, and counseling psychology, this article delves into the generational impacts of experiences.

Keywords: epigenetics, generational trauma, etiology

My 55-year journey through the healing arts began in medicine. I was in search of the etiology of chronic illness and neuro-psychiatric disorders. I had a sense these apparently divergent illnesses were not dissimilar in origin. My belief has always been that it is difficult to change chronic illness unless the origin of what needs to be changed is identified. This belief led me through the fields of surgical oncology, obstetrics and gynecology, and into obtaining a doctorate in counseling psychology. I served as a family therapist at residential addiction center and a psychosocial oncologist at the cancer center. At both centers, I found myself engaged in the patient's ancestral past and possible epigenetic phenomenon.

Epigenetics is the study of changes in gene activity that do not alter the genes themselves but still get passed down to at least one successive generation. These patterns of gene expression are governed by the cellular material — the epigenome — that sits on top of the genome, just outside it (hence the prefix *epi-*, which means above). It is these epigenetic “switches” that tell the genes to switch on or off, to speak loudly or whisper. It is through epigenetic switches that environmental factors like prenatal nutrition, stress, and postnatal maternal behavior can affect gene expression that is passed from one generation to the next.

As a result of my psychological training I routinely asked clients about their childhood and family of origin. When possible, I would invite the client's parents and/or relatives to attend some of the sessions. I was amazed how similar each generation's childhood was to that of their parents. At times, through the history taking, it was possible to obtain vital information on grandparents and great-grandparents. I found that the pain of abandonment and abuse was carried from generation to generation. It was uncanny, to me, how similar each generation's parent-to-child relationships were. Patients and their family members used identical words to describe what their childhood unmet needs and emotional pain were during the first 12 years of life.

For years my inner questioning of, “How emotional stimuli were inherited in both cancer and addiction through ‘epigenetics,’” eluded me. I was unable to determine the answer until I read an article in the January 2014 issue of *Natural Neurosciences* by Drs. Brian G. Dias and Kerry J. Ressler (2014).

Their research methodology was simple, as is all great science. In their study, they wafted a very pleasant smelling chemical over mice. The mice seem to enjoy it. The researchers then shocked the mice simultaneously with the delivery of the scent. In time, the mice, through conditioned response, would shudder whenever they perceived the scent, even without being shocked. Three generational litters of the conditioned mice would shake thereafter whenever they experienced that same scent without the accompanying shock.

The next experiment was seminal, no pun intended. The researchers took spermatozoa from shocked male mice and eggs from non-shocked mothers. Through in-vitro fertilization the conceptus was then placed in a surrogate mother. Three future generations of these mice shook when exposed to that same smell. The experiment was reversed. This time the eggs were taken from shocked mothers and non-shocked spermatozoa. The results were identical. These experiments were never carried out beyond three generations.

The only scientific conclusion is that future generational shuddering was linked to smell. And that specific feared smell could only have been carried by a male or female “X” chromosome. What

could be more evolutionarily ingenious than to have one generation transmit to the next important survival information than through the neurological sensory system? Each generation tells the next to unconsciously and instinctively attach to what is safe and to avoid what is unfamiliar, fearful, and dangerous. In humans this transmitting of information can be problematic.

Dr's Dias and Ressler (2014) wrote, "Such a phenomenon may contribute to the etiology and potential trans-generational transmission of risk for neuropsychiatric disorders such as, phobias, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorders." (p.96)

We are not mice. Life works for mice, but not as well for humans. We have a mind that is a composite of our experiences, our ancestors' experiences, and what we are taught in our lifetime by others. We all have lived long enough to know that truth evolves; therefore, there are no truths but close assumptions.

Humans, due to their highly evolved brain, sort information differently than mice. For human beings, the epigenetic mechanism for transmitting potential danger to future generations is both a gift and a curse. I believe that the implication of our trans-generationally transmitted emotional fear and pain is more than the major cause of inborn mental disorders. The impact that generational stress can have on organic illness is equally important. Generational stress gradually lowers or increases the immune function throughout the genome. Either impact on the immune response can be the cause of a host of non-neurogenic illnesses.

The human mind is the greatest stressor to inflict modern man. The mind creates stories to justify the emotional baggage that is unconsciously shared with our ancestors. Therefore, our present is muddled by our generational past. The key to being fully present in the moment is to first become aware that many of our feelings, judgments, and emotions are not entirely ours. To be conscious is to experience the moment-to-moment experience without being distracted by past knowledge or future projections.

Two primary beliefs of our ancestors continue to be the prime movers of our evolution and creativity. Yet these same beliefs presently threaten our survival. The first is, "I/we do not have enough to assure personal and family survival." This imperative drives humankind's creativity. The question is, when is "more" less? "More" becomes pathological when it morphs into greed, excess, and isolation.

Even more destructive is the second need. This need is rarely expressed. It is a recurring, unshared thought that takes many forms: "I'm not good enough, strong enough, rich enough, smart enough, worthy enough, loved enough." Enough...Enough! This self-talk drives the first belief for more goods and services. It is hoped that in the obtaining of more, the self-flagellation will stop. However, the wish fulfilled for "more" never replaces the universal deprecating thought of "not being enough."

Our ancestors had the identical two beliefs. But their lives were far more difficult. It is not too long ago in humankind's history when our ancestors lived as tribes with the rarely fulfilled survival needs of food, water, shelter, and protection. These needs were identical to other tribes who had more or fewer resources for their survival. They, too, had a hierarchy of needs and services. War and injustices became the vehicle for obtaining more. Over time, these tribes also became communities with the same unfulfilled physical and emotional needs for simple kindness. To salve their pain and despair of living bleak lives, individuals and groups had to imagine a better life and/or a place to rest in peace. Death and religion held that promise.

Communities expanded into religions and nations. These religions and nations feared each other, as did their ancestral tribes for encroaching on their beliefs and resources. The self-belief of our ancestors never changed, "I need more" and "I'm not enough," was the driving force behind human progress and evolution. Our inheritance came as a result of each generation's hard work and prayers that the next generation would have a safer, better external existence. Their desires and prayers were carried through centuries of struggle. Their hopes were realized by the twenty-first century.

However, the internal mind set, both individual and collective, remains fear based and when our sense of safety is threatened we revert to a familiar past. We waver and relive ancient emotional uncertainty. We continue to fear loss, need more, return to religious animosity, secure national

boundaries, seek more resources, forget ethical and moral beliefs, and fight wars for those who are dead. The planet is broken if we remain on this course of insanity. The old medical adage is prescient, "What saves, also kills."

This historical mindset is imbedded in our brains, stored as bio-chemicals, and entwined in bundled neurological circuitry. This dense mass represents the limbic area of the brain that stores emotions, motivation, and along with the cerebellum, long-term memory. We are born with racism, prejudices, beliefs, fears, and distrust of anything that has previously been a threat to our specific group of ancestors. However, when memories of the past ancestors are re-experienced in the present, chemicals, neuropeptides, are released throughout the body and represent our "emotions." We interpret our perceptions of these chemical emotions as "feelings" which our mind translates into "thoughts." Believing our thoughts to be purely ours and quite coherent, we form "stories" and beliefs about the present that originated in the past.

It is as if we are born on a carousel, the environment moves around us but we don't move. We experience most of life as something happening to and around us. However, it is a self-directed movie, a movie that appears very different than the world of our parents. While the external is ever changing, our internal environment remains very similar. Technology has changed what and how we "do" things. Yet this progress has not changed, in the least, "who" we are inside, our essential self.

Even marriage unconsciously recalls the scenarios of our parent's relationship, which in time seeps into ours. We have children who release the unconscious gifts and hurts of our child-to-parent relationship. We promise ourselves that we'll be different. Over time, we notice ourselves parenting as we were parented. Or, we go overboard and want our children to love us because we felt unloved or not enough by our parents and so become permissive. In either case, our children turn out partly cloned. We cannot give meaningful love to others, if it is not fueled by self-love.

Our historical past informs our present, and therefore, the mind searches for what is most familiar and fears uncertainty. What has never been experienced or different is feared. In psychotherapy, the slightest suggestion to a client in therapy is threatening. Patients search for answers but advice is rarely applied. Internal change is threatening to the psyche. If there is a choice to live with uncertainty or familiarity, we addictively choose the familiar, even if it is painful. We are all unconsciously addicted, too often existing in a world of our own creation.

It is for this reason that we tend to do the same things over and over yet, unknowingly, get the same results. This has been termed insanity. Seeing has dictated our believing, "evidence based proof." But science too often is based on false assumptions that over time are usually proven inadequate or wrong.

"What one believes to be true is true both experimentally and experientially, but these beliefs are to be transcended." Lilly (1985)

There is only one thing worthy of remembering. We are alive, here, now! We are surrounded by beauty. This beauty is created through our perception of varying differences. To want everything and everyone to be the same is bland death. Beauty is found in difference. The recognition and fear of different peoples was a survival skill learned and taught by our ancestors. In 2014, the acceptance of the differences found in individuals and religion is a necessary survival strategy for all humankind.

So, this simple and therefore elegant research is prescient in understanding: the brain, the gifts and curses of pain and fear, the pathology, as well as the purpose of mind, and how the historical past impacts the epigene provide further insights into health and illness. The mechanism for human evolution and what truly is consciousness and finally what we must do individually and collectively to create a more conscious, peaceful life, and easier death is the resulting gift.

Prenatal and perinatal therapy is the preventive medicine of the future. The immaculate conceptions are children born free of parental projections into families that have cleared their minds of their ancestral past. These children are born through parents but not of them. These parents have self-love for themselves, love for each other and every other living thing.

References

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