

A Note on Defamiliarization of Health; from Completeness to Wholeness

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Editorial

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The most famous definition of health is provided by the World Health Organization (1948): “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. The global acceptance of such an idealistic and non-pragmatic description of health has always surprised me.

Through this window, you see a medical utopia, with healthy people in a timeless state of complete welfare. Nobody can meet such criteria, and therefore, health remains an idea beyond the real world of deficits and desire.

The second part of the definition emphasizes the criticism of the disease-oriented representation of health. However, this positive description is as vague as the negative determinants of health, such as the absence of disease, or the silence of organs.

It seems that something is profoundly wrong with the concept of health. Health is a phantom behind a painless body which is only revealed in our wishes for health when we are in face of an illness. It is present in its absence!

Assigning a noun for a complex and dynamic self-regulatory process such as health is completely inappropriate. Health can be an attribute of an organism that indicates integrity and balance. Health can also be a verb like “healthing”; the process of co-constructing and recreating the balance of a living system.

Life is a self-referential and self-dissipative system, as Lumann explains. Life is a sustainable-unstable system, and therefore, we cannot suppose a constant reference for the balance of an organism. While homeostasis reflects the stability of an organism, autopoiesis shows how a complex organism stabilizes itself in a complex environment and recreates balance by co-emerging new orders.

Health, as an attribute of an autopoietic system, can be mentioned as a complex tendency of life to balance between these two fundamental forces towards “sameness” and “otherness”.

In this sense, health is neither a final state, nor is it the promised land of wandering drives of life. Health is the tendency to integrate information-energy flows within, and between bodies. The ever-existing difference between the expectations of sameness and perceptions of otherness forces organisms to make new meanings/ functions.

Health, from a systemic viewpoint, can be defined as an intelligent trend to the coherency of the meaning-making processes of an organism in its functional closure by structural openness.

For a complex living system like humans, the interwoven and transforming meaning-making systems appear in the forms of energetic, material, symbolic, and reflective signs. Signs shape our bodies and lifeworlds; from a methylation signal interpreted as gene inhibition by the DNA to an announcement on the media interpreted as a strike by a community. All the physical, mental, and social functions are indeed the interpretations of these vast varieties of signs.

Now, you can imagine that all the physical and symbolic functions are integrated to reconstruct the balance between the needs and resources of the organism. Having an inner world is the result of symbolic and reflective signs.

Accordingly, our body has, at least, two worlds of “I”, as subject or reflective qualia, and “It”, as a natural or social object. A systemic definition of health should not only cover both worlds of the human condition but also, integrate all the energy-matter signs and symbol-reflection signs in a multiversal body.

We need a dynamic and physical-phenomenological definition of health that explores our salutogenetic efforts on the spectrum of higher health. Salutogenesis is a much more proper concept for exploring health processing.

Salutogenesis explores the I-It interactions of the body, which make life comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful. These factors, as Antonovsky explains, determine the sense of coherence, and how we narrate and behave in the world. All of the parameters are related to the integrity of internal and external meaning-making processes. The functional misinterpretations and the structural blockages bring about incoherence and dissatisfaction. Misinterpretations actually lead to the fragmentation of a whole body.

Salutogenesis is an orientation towards wholeness. It implicates the facilitation of healing servomechanisms by feeling and acting as a whole. Despite the pathological approach, salutogenesis focuses on top-down organization. Wholeness has the same etymological root as health and healing.

If we re-establish health based on wholeness, instead of completeness, a new horizon of care and cure will appear. From this viewpoint, an end-stage patient who feels love and dignity deeply can be evaluated in a higher health state in comparison with a young athlete feeling fixated on rage and regret. Health can be regarded as a modality of existence, not the soundness of all parts.

Health and illness can be redefined relying on the more functional and higher-order aspects of human life. A person with disabilities is not necessarily a disabled person, since they can be functionally integrated, due to recreating a novel balance between expectations and perceptions. Now, their narrative includes all the difficult events and rising limitations, and they accept all of them as their own life. It means that their network of physical and symbolic interpretations is synergetic.

A healthy body is a consistent intra-inter-transpersonal meaning-making system. It feels like a whole body beyond all defects and works with its totality. Wholeness can be enhanced by bodily awareness and functional tensegrity as well as a coherent

narrative, and synergetic relationships.

If we want to establish a systemic model of health, first we need to change our essentialistic and timeless assumptions of the biobehavioral model. In summary, we need such a change in our mindset, as follows:

- 1- Life is an autopoietic system that is recreating its co-emerging balance.
- 2- The human body is a multilingual sign system, and its balance depends on the coherence of energetic-material and symbolic-reflective meaning-making processes.
- 3- Health is not a state of balance but an active tendency to reintegrate energy-information flows.
- 4- Salutogenesis reflects how health can be enhanced by being and doing as a whole.

The literature on defining health is incredibly poor. It seems that medical scientists were under the assumption that medical technology and technics can progressively and properly promote health without any integrative health model. This note is a brief reflection on a systemic view of health and doubting that when we talk about health, we really know what we are even talking about.

Conflict of Interests

Authors have no conflict of interests.

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