

Cambridge University Press
0521806305 - Meaning, Medicine, and the “Placebo Effect”
Daniel E. Moerman
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Meaning, Medicine, and the “Placebo Effect”

Daniel E. Moerman presents an innovative and enlightening discussion of human reaction to the meaning of medical treatment. Many things happen in medicine that cannot be attributed to specific elements, such as drugs or surgical procedures. The same drug can work differently when presented in different colors; inert drugs (placebos, dummies) often have dramatic effects on people (the “placebo effect”); and effects can vary hugely among different European countries where the “same” medical condition is understood differently, or has different meanings, yielding different meaning responses. This lively book reviews and analyzes these matters in lucid, straightforward prose, guiding the reader through a very complex body of literature, leaving nothing unexplained but avoiding any oversimplification.

DANIEL E. MOERMAN is William E. Stirton Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He is a fellow of the American Anthropological Association and Secretary of the International Society for Ethnopharmacology. His recent book *Native American Ethnobotany* (1998) received the “Annual Literature Award” of the Council on Botanical and Horticultural Libraries for 2000.

Cambridge University Press
 0521806305 - Meaning, Medicine, and the “Placebo Effect”
 Daniel E. Moerman
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Cambridge Studies in Medical Anthropology

Editor

ALAN HARWOOD *University of Massachusetts, Boston*

Editorial Board

WILLIAM DRESSLER *University of Alabama*
 RONALD FRANKENBERG *Brunel University, UK*
 MARY JO GOOD *Harvard University*
 SHARON KAUFMAN *University of California, San Francisco*
 SHIRLEY LINDENBAUM *City University of New York*
 MARGARET LOCK *McGill University*
 CATHERINE PANTER-BRICK *University of Durham, UK*

Medical anthropology is the fastest growing specialist area within anthropology, both in North America and in Europe. Beginning as an applied field serving public health specialists, medical anthropology now provides a significant forum for many of the most urgent debates in anthropology and the humanities. It includes the study of medical institutions and health care in a variety of rich and poor societies, the investigation of the cultural construction of illness, and the analysis of ideas about the body, birth, maturity, ageing, and death.

This series includes theoretically innovative monographs, state-of-the-art collections of essays on current issues, and short books introducing main themes in the subdiscipline.

1. Lynn M. Morgan, *Community Participation in Health: The Politics of Primary Care in Costa Rica*
2. Thomas J. Csordas (ed.), *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Health*
3. Paul Brodwin, *Medicine and Morality in Haiti: The Contest for Healing Power*
4. Susan Reynolds Whyte, *Questioning Misfortune: The Pragmatics of Uncertainty in Eastern Uganda*
5. Margaret Lock and Patricia Kaufert, *Pragmatic Women and Body Politics*
6. Vincanne Adams, *Doctors for Democracy*
7. Elisabeth Hsu, *The Transmission of Chinese Medicine*
8. Margaret Lock, Allan Young and Alberto Cambrosio (eds.), *Living and Working with the New Medical Technologies: Intersections of Inquiry*

Further titles will include:

Susan Reynolds Whyte, Sjaak van der Geest and Anita Hardon, *The Social Lives of Medicines*
 James Trostle, *Epidemiology and Culture*

Cambridge University Press
0521806305 - Meaning, Medicine, and the “Placebo Effect”
Daniel E. Moerman
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Meaning, Medicine, and the “Placebo Effect”

Daniel E. Moerman
University of Michigan-Dearborn



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
0521806305 - Meaning, Medicine, and the “Placebo Effect”
Daniel E. Moerman
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Daniel E. Moerman 2002

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2002
Reprinted 2004

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Plantin 10/12 pt *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 80630 5 hardback
ISBN 0 521 00087 4 paperback

Cambridge University Press
0521806305 - Meaning, Medicine, and the “Placebo Effect”
Daniel E. Moerman
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

For Claudine,
with admiration, affection, and love

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>List of tables</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xii
Introduction: “Pickle ash” and “high blood”	1
Part I The meaning response	7
1 Healing and medical treatment	9
2 The healing process	16
3 Measurement and its ambiguities	22
4 Doctors and patients	32
5 Formal factors and the meaning response	47
6 Knowledge and culture; illness and healing	67
Part II Applications, challenges, and opportunities	87
7 Psychotherapy: placebo effect or meaning response?	89
8 The neurobiology and cultural biology of pain	100
9 “More research is needed”: The cases of “adherence” and “self-reported health”	116
10 Other approaches: learning, expecting, and conditioning	122
11 Ethics, placebos, and meaning	127
Part III Meaning and human biology	131
12 The extent (and limits) of meaning	133
13 Conclusions: many claims, many issues	147
<i>References</i>	156
<i>Index</i>	169
	ix

Figures

2.1	Improvement after an hour with branded or generic placebo and aspirin	<i>page</i> 19
4.1	Effects of physician knowledge on patient response to inert medication	33
4.2	Old drugs become less effective as new drugs come along	44
5.1	Belle removes a loose tooth from Bandit using a small stick while Shadow looks on. Photo used by permission, © William C. McGrew	55
6.1	Inert injections are more effective for migraine in the United States, but not in Europe	79
8.1	Elements of placebo analgesia	106
8.2	Cultural variation in chronic pain perception	114
12.1	The meaning response and the placebo effect	134
12.2	Dependent and independent variables	139
12.3	Variability in outcome of active and placebo treatment for ulcer disease	145
13.1	The Old Man of La Chapelle. Reproduced with the permission of C. Loring Brace, © M. L. Brace 1971	153

Tables

4.1	Elements of effective discussion of the medical management plan	<i>page</i> 40
5.1	Outcome of actual and sham surgery for angina pectoris; amount of subjective improvement	59
12.1	Types of neurological control	142

Acknowledgments

I wrote my first scholarly article about issues discussed in this book in 1979. I have, then, worked on and thought about the matter for about twenty-five years. The University of Michigan-Dearborn has been my professional home for that entire period; I owe a great debt to colleagues – both faculty, staff and administrators – who, in that time, have supported me intellectually and institutionally. Among them are Victor Wong, Jim Foster, John Presley, Paul Wong, Robert Simpson, and Dan Little, all administrators who have strongly supported the principle of the teacher-scholar which created the opportunity for the work. Drew Buchanan provided invaluable technical and personal support; Bob Fraser provided those, plus helpful counsel on biblical translations. Department chairs Don Levin, Rick Straub and Barry Bogin provided ample real support in time, equipment, and space for my various efforts. Many colleagues, too, helped by reading chapters or the whole text, or by engaging in discussion about both the larger and the smaller issues one confronts in such work. Among those who were particularly helpful were Paul Zitzewitz, John Gillespie, Dan Swift, Barry Bogin, and Katie Anderson-Levitt. In a class by himself is Larry Radine who helped me over what seemed at the time to be an insurmountable obstacle; thanks, Larry. Colleagues from around the US and Europe also helped in many ways: Bob Ader, Mirielle Belloni, Steve Bolling, Loring Brace, Howard Brody, Claire Cassidy, Nicholas Christakis, Tom Csordas, Ton de Craen, Susan DiGiacomo, Linda Engel, Michel Gabrielli, Rick Gracely, Harry Guess, Robert Hahn, Ellen Idler, Wayne Jonas, Ted Kaptchuk, Irving Kirsch, Martin Leon, Claude Levi-Strauss, Shirley Lindenbaum, Margaret Lock, Bruce Moseley, John Payer, Lola Romanucci-Ross, John Ross, Pat Rozee, Bill Stebbins, Jon Stoessl, Sjaak van der Geest, and Andrew Vickers all helped in one way or the other, large or small, sometimes not really knowing that our conversations were going to end up here (I may not have known it at the time either). Bill McGrew provided the photo of “chimpanzee dentistry,” and also was a valuable advisor on other matters regarding primates. Although it didn’t start until the book was half done, the “Placebo Group,”

Cambridge University Press
0521806305 - Meaning, Medicine, and the “Placebo Effect”
Daniel E. Moerman
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

xiii

organized by Anne Harrington as part of the program of the Harvard University Mind/Brain/Behavior Initiative, has been enormously influential in my final shaping of this work. The broadly interdisciplinary discussions with that group are among the very finest academic experiences I have ever had; thanks to Anne Harrington, Nick Humphrey, Howard Fields, Fabrizio Benedetti, Jamie Pennebaker, Dan Wegner and Ginger Hoffman. Alan Harwood suggested the project, and shepherded it along with gentle but persistent pressure for the best book I could produce. My sister-in-law – a very fine scientist – Elena Moerman, and my old friend and neighbor Will Cummings read all or most of the manuscript and made many valuable suggestions. Good friends Jan Berry and John Copley provided deeply appreciated neighborly support. Most long suffering perhaps have been the hundreds of students in Anthro 430 Medical Anthropology over the years who have heard these arguments and helped me to make them both clear and persuasive. The National Science Foundation generously supported some of the work described here; Stuart Plattner of NSF was particularly helpful to me on many occasions.

Finally, my family – my wife Claudine, our children and their spouses Jennifer, Chris, Fred, Patti, Anne, and grandchildren Allison and Spencer – have all heard this, too, and have kept me smiling.

I have had great fun with this project; I kept telling myself how easy it would be to write a “placebo book” because it doesn’t have anything in it.

The publisher has endeavored to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.