

The Unmaking and Making of Self: Embodied Suffering and Mind-Body Healing in Brazilian Candomblé

Rebecca Seligman

Abstract Discontinuities in the experience of self are distressing especially when they are unexpected, unsanctioned, and resist attribution. Such discontinuities are often a product of psychosocial and physical suffering. In this article I present a model of self that incorporates bodily experience as a fundamental building block and key source of discontinuity for a sense of self. Analysis of data from adherents of an African-derived spirit possession religion in northeastern Brazil illustrate the ways in which embodied mechanisms, including psychophysiological processes, contribute to the construction, deconstruction, and repair of selves. With case studies from Candomblé, I reveal how subjects use cultural tools to contribute to transformations in both cognitive and bodily processes of incoherence, ameliorate distress, and create positive looping effects that allow selves to re-cohere. In developing this position I advance understanding of the dynamics of embodied forms of self-healing and contribute to the literatures on Candomblé in particular and possession more generally. [embodiment, spirit possession, healing, self, Brazil]

Within the anthropological literature, there is a growing recognition that suffering has profound implications for subjectivity (Das and Das 2007; Kleinman et al. 1997; Lock 1999). There is also wide consensus that suffering is difficult to define but is typically used to refer to physical, psychological, or social pain caused by anything from illness and disability, to psychological trauma, to negative self-judgments, or institutionalized discrimination (Farmer 1997; Morris 1997). Suffering has the potential to undermine the coherence of lived selves and create the experience of internal conflict, disjuncture, or fragmentation. Moreover, discontinuities in the experience of self may themselves be a source of suffering, especially when they are unexpected, unsanctioned, and resist attribution.

Following insights of scholars like Thomas Csordas (1993, 1994a, b) I conceptualize “self” as processual, having reflexive or self-objectifying elements associated with self-concept and self-representation, but also constituted through what phenomenologists refer to as “pre-reflective” embodied elements that are prior to and fundamentally shape self-objectification (Csordas 1990). Elsewhere, I have defined *identity* as enduring self-concepts and self-understandings, which are strongly influenced through social feedback and vulnerable to the disjunctive effects of suffering (Seligman 2005b). The concept of “self” I employ here builds on this notion of identity to encompass not only these cognitive-discursive and reflexive elements but also embodied aspects of experience, including the direct experience of occupying a particular body, sensory-motor dimensions of experience, and bodily processes of

attention and perception. I argue that to fully understand the deconstructive effects of suffering on self, scholars need to attend not only to identity and the reflexive elements of self but also to experiential-embodied dimensions, where suffering is likely to be deeply instantiated.

Using data on experiences of suffering and selfhood among Candomblé mediums in northeastern Brazil, I build a model of self addressing how selves suffer discontinuities and how such discontinuities can be repaired. I develop three main arguments that build on my own and others' work in this area (Seligman 2005b; Csordas 1994a):

1. Self is at the intersection of the mind–body. It is an emergent product of both cognitive-discursive and embodied processes; in other words, processes at both levels are in constant feedback with one another in the creation and maintenance of self. Both are implicated in threats to and disruptions of self and in its repair.
2. Suffering can threaten the coherence of self through effects on both its cognitive-discursive and bodily elements. For instance, physical or somatic suffering can lead to a fractured sense of self in part through effects on cognized self-representations. Disruptions or conflicts in cognized self-representations can lead to the experience of discontinuities in embodied aspects of self.
3. Healing practices that simultaneously address the cognitive-discursive and embodied aspects of self can be particularly effective. Candomblé mediumship is an example of such a healing modality. The integrative religious ideology, process of initiation, and elements of mediumship operate to heal disrupted selves through both embodied and discursive practices that reinforce one another in the process.

This article builds on previous work in which I demonstrated how Candomblé helps effect healing transformations at the cognitive level by rescripting self-models and narratives (Seligman 2005b). I add here an examination of the role of bodily processes and mechanisms in self-experience. My observations and analyses of subjects' experiences of suffering and their processes of self-healing make the larger point that self is fundamentally embodied and that the cognitive and bodily aspects of self are mutually constitutive.

The Embodied Self

The concept of “self” has been the subject of exploration and debate in recent anthropological writing. Psychological and cultural anthropologists have produced a large body of work treating the self as a discursive formation (Ewing 1990; Rosaldo 1984; Shweder and Bourne 1984). Thus, as Naomi Quinn observed (2006), when anthropologists talk about self what many mean is self-representation—the concept(s) of ourselves that we represent to ourselves, in a reflexive, rhetorical process. In her much cited 1990 article, Katherine Ewing argued explicitly that this is the only definition of *self* of real relevance to anthropology (1990).

Ewing's primary concern is in critiquing the Western notion of a unitary, coherent self (Ewing 1990; Quinn 2006; Shweder and Bourne 1984). She argues that while most people experience themselves as relatively whole, in actuality, self-representations are multiple and shifting. Ironically, while Ewing and others critique the notion of self as coherent and unitary, they simultaneously reify the concept of self itself, treating it as a single type of thing: specifically, a discursive thing. This reification of self as self-representation reproduces another ethnocentric epistemology: Western mind-body dualism that fails to acknowledge the importance of embodied dimensions of self.

While many anthropologists have begun to employ the concept of embodiment in their work, the body itself remains something of a "black box" (Green 1998). With the notable exception of work by theorists within the phenomenological tradition who have made important and persuasive arguments for the fundamental role of embodiment in self (Csordas 1990, 1993, 1994a, 1994b; Kontos 2006), anthropological discussions tend to focus on the body in shaping metaphors and ideologies of self (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). While such metaphors and ideologies fundamentally influence lived experience, they may also, as Hollan (1992) has shown, represent culturally prescribed ideals that diverge from subjective experience and intuitive understandings.

For instance, although it has been convincingly demonstrated that people's self-representations are not unitary, but instead situated, multiple, and shifting, phenomenologists argue that implicit, embodied forms of self-experience, known as the "prereflective self" (Csordas 1990; Fuchs 2001; Merleau-Ponty 1962) create a fundamental, intuitive sense of first-personness that unites an individual's experiences. Thus, focus on multiplicity in the cognized aspects of self has meant a failure to acknowledge the most basic embodied nature of self that, as Mauss (1985) pointed out, contributes to a lived experience of relative self-coherence shared by people everywhere.

In addition to a disproportionate emphasis on discursive as opposed to experiential aspects of self, I argue that anthropological discussions of self have neglected the role of biological processes and mechanisms in embodied self-experience. In this article I aim to advance these discussions through an exploration of biophysical mechanisms and their role as pathways through which knowledge is imprinted on the body. Antonio Damasio argues in *Descartes' Error* (1995) that the body in action, as it senses and responds to the environment moment by moment, forms the core or "ground reference" for the neural representation of self (1995:235). Information does not enter the brain directly but, rather, through the body. The act of perception involves what Damasio calls a "double signal." Signals are transmitted through sensory organs and used to form representations of objects being perceived. At the same time sensory organs send separate signals to form representations of current bodily states. Subjective experience, Damasio (1995) argues, is based on processing of this self-related information together with information about the objects of perception in "convergence zones" or brain areas capable of receiving signals from the first two sites via "feed-forward neural connections." This results in an experience of self partly based on processing of data about the experience, or feeling, of perception itself: "You do not just see:

you feel you are seeing something with your eyes" (Damasio 1995:233). This feeling, or the mental representations it forms, is usually left in the background, not attended to, while the explicit content of sensual perception (what we are seeing) is foregrounded. This "double signal" account of perception provides a neurobiological mechanism for the phenomenology of the prereflective self. The fundamental "first-personal" quality of experience and the "feeling of what an experience is like" are products of the most basic biophysical features of the embodied nature of perception (Legrand 2006).

Cognitive scientists have offered abundant evidence that in general conceptual thought is less abstract and more embodied than previous models of mind suggest, even demonstrating that such thought makes use of the sensorimotor system of our brains (Barsalou et al. 2003; Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Using such research to look inside the "black box" of the body and examine the biological mechanisms through which self is constituted, can help anthropologists move beyond a vague notion that embodied experience acts to shape self-experience, to demonstrate empirically how the conceptual or cognized self is grounded in the embodied self, and the sensorimotor and physiological processes from which it emerges.

For example, the experience of occupying a particular body contributes to a sense of the self as coherent and separate from other body-selves (Mauss 1985; Schepers-Hughes and Lock 1987). Coherence is also supported by the flow of embodied, self-related information to the brain¹ and self-regulatory mechanisms that organize this information into a consistent, integrated experience of self at the cognitive level (Damasio 1995; LeDoux 2002).

Self-regulatory mechanisms include: integrative neural capacities, attentional mechanisms, and symbolic practices. A continuous looping takes place among these self-regulatory mechanisms at different levels: attention and information processing mechanisms fundamentally shape cognition by reducing complexity and excluding extraneous material, and cognitive models in turn direct attention and influence the content of perception. Symbolic practices, including narrative smoothing techniques, are used to explain, dismiss, or minimize the experience of any inconsistencies that come to conscious awareness (Bruner 1994; Kirmayer 1994). Looping among these different levels contributes to a dynamic, emergent self that is constantly undergoing challenges, ruptures, and repairs.

Disruptions of Self

Physical or emotional suffering is likely to undermine or disrupt the fundamental coherence of self by creating conditions under which dissonances and contradictions in self experience are not smoothed over by self-regulatory mechanisms. Rather, the experience of suffering results in sudden, abrupt, and profound changes in affect, chronic emotional dysregulation, chronic stress, acute and chronic pain, and other physical perturbations that dominate perception, redirect attention, threaten cognized self-representations, and undermine taken-for-granted systems of attribution. In turn, the experience of a divided self is itself

distressing when it defies personal and normative expectations and attributions. Hence, suffering may be both a cause and a consequence of a disrupted self.

Culture influences whether discontinuities of self contribute to suffering by determining whether they are brought to awareness and acknowledged, and if so, whether they are socially marked as disruptive (Hollan 2004; Kirmayer 1994; Seligman and Kirmayer 2008). That is, culture provides models for self that influence the way in which attention is focused on experiences and behaviors (Csordas 1983; Shutz 1967). Suffering disrupts normal patterns of attention and undermines a sense of self-directedness, or a sense that one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors can be explained in terms that resonate with one's intentions and motivations (Graham and Stephens 1994).

One way in which disruptions of attention lead to negative circles of suffering and self-conflict, is by creating conscious awareness of processes normally left in the background. As phenomenologists have argued (Fuchs 2001), and researchers studying the effects of chronic illness have demonstrated (Becker 1997; Leventhal et al. 1999), when the body is no longer the taken-for-granted medium of experience, it can become a disconcerting obstacle to be overcome. For example, Ellis-Hill and colleagues (2000) have demonstrated how the need to focus attention on basic physical acts, like walking, creates a sense of self-division within stroke patients. Such shifts in awareness contribute to a kind of "hyperreflexivity," or what I have referred to elsewhere as "hyperembodiment" (Seligman 2005a), that fragments the flow of self-experience (Sass and Parnas 2001). In other words, too much awareness of one's bodily processes or attention to the experience of oneself thinking and perceiving, distances people from that experience. This is because the reflexive mode of awareness is a self-objectifying mode (Hallowell 1955) and self-objectification separates individuals from their subjective experience.

Embodied processes responsible for the regulation of arousal may play a major role in what humans attend to, the quality of that attention, and related perceptions. Attention is intimately connected to bodily self-regulation via psychophysiological systems, including cardiovascular activity and the release of stress hormones (Froelich 1978; Lawler and Schmied 1988; Richards 1987). Reactivity of cardiovascular and neuroendocrine systems to stressors is variable, and this variability is a product both of innate and ontogenetic inter-individual differences (Kagan 1994; Rothbart 1989). The result is that some individuals are more "reactive" than others, more prone to become physiologically aroused in response to perceived stressors, and have more difficulty modulating their arousal appropriately (Lewis 1992; Porges 1991). The inability of highly reactive individuals to effectively self-regulate arousal affects their capacity to respond dynamically to the environment through the allocation of attention (Lawler and Schmied 1988; Porges 1991). Reactive individuals who focus more attention on their own bodily responses feel a lack of identification with, and control over their bodies. Such intrusive physiological responses feel disconnected from self-concept and intention and thus move the body from the site of subjective experience to an object of conscious awareness, resulting in a sense of corporeal alienation: my body is not under my control; it is not me—it is other.²

In the research I discuss in the following sections I explore the centrality of such embodied, self-related disruptions in attracting specific individuals to Candomblé and address the potential of participation in the religion to aid in the reintegration of disjointed selves by addressing suffering and selfhood through multiple channels at once.

Self and Suffering among Candomblé Participants

Data presented here are drawn from a larger study (Seligman 2005a; 2005b) examining the social, psychological, and psychobiological factors associated with initiation into mediumship within a particular variant or *nação* (nation) of the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomblé³ (Bastide 2001). Research took place during the period from 2000 to 2001, in Salvador, Brazil, capital of the northeastern state of Bahia. Salvador has been referred to as “Black Rome,” in reference to its role as the center of Candomblé practice (Selka 2007).

I used an array of qualitative and quantitative methods to gather and analyze data including: sources of suffering, forms of psychobodily expression of suffering and its effects on self, and the role of Candomblé in people’s narratives of suffering and self-healing. Study methods included: participant-observation of upward of 40 Candomblé rituals, observation of ritual preparations, and hours of informal interaction with participants; semistructured interviews and a Brazilian screening instrument for depression and anxiety (the *Questionário Morbidade Psiquiátrica dos Adultos*, or QMPA)⁴ administered to 51 Candomblé participants (11 mediums, 10 nonmedium initiates, and 20 uninitiated frequenters) and 20 non-Candomblé controls from the community; 6 spiritual life-history interviews, 2 to 3 hours each, were conducted, and each was audio-recorded.⁵ In addition, impedance cardiography, a measure of cardiovascular function,⁶ was used during semistructured interviews to generate data on autonomic nervous system markers of emotional reactivity and stress sensitivity. Baseline recordings were taken from mediums and a comparison group of nonmedium initiates, or those initiated adepts who do not become possessed or enter trance states. I focus in this article on the data from semistructured and life history narratives referencing other data from the project as needed.

Anthropologists have documented links between possession and social marginality in a number of cultural contexts (Boddy 1993; Lewis 1971), and Prandi has argued of Candomblé specifically, that it “tends to attract . . . all sorts of individuals who have been socially marked and marginalized” (Prandi 2000:655, translation mine). Consistent with such research, I found that many of the participants in my study were “socially marked” in some way: of the 11 mediums with whom I worked closely, 9 were women and 2 were gay men; almost 80 percent of the total 51 Candomblé participants I interviewed worked in low-paying service sector jobs as maids, janitors, and vendors, and nearly 20 percent were unemployed; other individuals were socially “marked” by their failure to live up to social expectations, for instance by not marrying or having children, or by slipping below their social class (Seligman 2005a).

Spiritual life history narratives of the mediums in my study emphasized social, emotional, and somatic crises, and episodes of spontaneous dissociation endured immediately prior to becoming initiated into Candomblé. Common forms of suffering reported by these individuals included overlapping social and emotional suffering related to: interpersonal problems and discord, especially within the family; traumatic life events or misfortune (i.e., death of a loved one, miscarriage, injury to self or loved one, domestic or sexual abuse, job loss, and financial crisis); and general malaise (Seligman 2005a). Mediums reported simultaneous or consecutive acute sources of distress (i.e., death of a loved one, followed by job loss and financial crisis, interpersonal problems, and finally physical illness) that together created experiences of grief, anger, social dislocation, desperation, bodily pain, and an overriding sense of suffering.

The suffering body figures prominently in narratives of mediums I interviewed, who reported a wide range of physical maladies, from mysterious illnesses resembling tuberculosis, to headaches, dizziness, and skin conditions. These somatic crises commonly represented the culmination of a history of social and emotional suffering and constituted immediate precipitants of initiation into mediumship: 63 percent (or 7 of 11) of the mediums in my study reported being motivated by embodied experiences of illness to become involved in the Candomblé religion. Many also described transformation of the suffering self through the process of initiation and spiritual practice (Seligman 2005b).

My research investigated the hypothesis that because the self is both cognized and embodied, the mental, emotional, and interpersonal upheavals experienced by mediums prior to initiation and their somatic or embodied suffering are mutually reinforcing, and together, act to create profound ruptures in the taken-for-granted experience of self. In the next sections, I present an overview of the logic of self and practice in Candomblé that, combined with case study data to follow, illustrates the ways in which Candomblé recognizes disruptions to, and promotes repair of, selves rent by the experience of suffering. I argue that the logic cum practice of Candomblé effects mutually reinforcing transformations in both cognitive and embodied processes.

Self and Embodiment in Candomblé

In the Candomblé cosmology, humans share the universe with a pantheon of deities, known as Orixás, as well as several types of lesser spirits. The Orixás exist on a higher spiritual plane than humans, although they may take human form by possessing the bodies of individuals who act as their mediums (Bastide 2001; Verger 1981). Every human being has a primary Orixá, known as the “owner of the head” (Prandi 2000; Verger 1981). This sense of “ownership” underscores the belief that the personality of a particular Orixá is part of the true nature of the individual whose head it owns. Failure to acknowledge one’s Orixás is understood to lead to disturbances in life, trouble with interpersonal relationships or jobs, and even health problems. In other words, it can lead to various forms of “suffering.”

To identify their Orixás, individuals consult with a Candomblé spiritual leader, or Mãe-Pai de Santo, who performs a divination. By identifying the Orixás who own an individual's head, a spiritual leader identifies and highlights key aspects of that individual's self (Prandi 2000). This identification is significant in the context of Candomblé because it is an active component of a system that encourages individuals to accept that some fundamental part of their self (the Orixá part) is not under their direct control. Yet at the same time this system encourages each individual to know and respect this element of self, and in this way to exercise a certain amount of control over it. Spiritual leaders I interviewed attributed characteristics of individuals to the Orixás who owned their heads, and emphasized that individuals must engage in appropriate practices to respect, indulge, and accommodate both their Orixás, and the Orixá characteristics of themselves. Hence, the Candomblé belief system positions the Orixá aspect of self as simultaneously me and not me, self and not-self.

In the context of profound religious conviction, the kind associated especially with initiation, identification of an individual's Orixás encourages the redirection of attention and thereby helps to reshape the meaning of experience and behavior. Analysis of the way that mediums talked about their relationships to their Orixás suggests that for many, identification of the Orixás focuses attention on aspects of self to be understood as fundamental. For others, identification with the Orixás highlights an aspect of self that has been overattended to, or is impossible to ignore, and convinces them that they are not its agent. Overall, this process enables individuals to attend to different aspects of their cognitive and emotional repertoire, and motivates them to develop distinct agentic stances toward different types of behaviors. Thus, the possibility for sanctioned divisions of subjectivity opened up by Candomblé participation creates psychologically and socially ambiguous forms of agency (Ahearn 2001): new sets of behaviors may be adopted that can be claimed or disavowed as products of the self through their attribution to forces outside the realm of human agency.

The Candomblé religious system also includes the notion that certain individuals can enter trance states and be possessed by the Orixás who own their heads, and from the perspective of Candomblé these individuals must be formally initiated into the role of medium to promote healing. The human individual is thought to be totally unaware of what his or her body does while possessed, and has amnesia for the entire period during which he or she is in trance. Built into this religious system, therefore, is the idea that individuals may experience discontinuities in self-experience at the level of body, memory, personal responsibility, and identity (Seligman and Kirmayer 2008). Such discontinuities are often labeled *dissociation* in the scholarly literature, a term that refers to both pathological and nonpathological alterations in the normally integrated functions of consciousness (Spiegel and Cardeña 1991). Dissociation is frequently associated with situations in which individuals find it desirable to shift attention away from ordinary self-awareness, either to expand the social possibilities of self or to escape its psychological and emotional burdens, or both (Seligman and Kirmayer 2008).

A number of scholars have pointed out that Candomblé is a religion of practice, rather than doctrine (Johnson 2002; Prandi 2000). Practices revolve around the life force of the

universe, known as *axé*, the accumulation and depletion of which are fundamentally embodied processes. Sacrifices, consumption of sacred food and feasting, rituals of cleansing, ritualized movements and physical acts of devotion (e.g., prostration), intense dancing, and trance and possession, during which the body is given over completely to spiritual powers, all serve to bolster *axé* (Prandi 2000; Motta 2005; Voeks 1997; Wafer 1991). Active involvement of the body is so central to Candomblé practice that Roberto Motta has referred to it as “a religion of the body” (2005:305).

In Candomblé belief, all areas of life, including bodily well-being, suffer when one’s *axé* is depleted. Spiritual crisis depletes *axé* and is manifest as the social and emotional suffering described earlier, culminating for many in some form of bodily suffering. Hence, the body can be read as an index of spiritual well-being, and for this reason, somatic crises are the most frequent catalysts for initiation. At the same time, the logic of possession concerns control or animation of the body by forces other than the individual’s mind or will. Thus a dysfunctional body is a perfectly matched metaphor for both the lack of control the individual feels in his or her life, and for the need or desire to relinquish control to the gods. In this sense, an understanding of disruptions of self and spirit as fundamentally embodied processes is built into the logic of Candomblé. Such disruptions are addressed in the ritualization of discontinuities among aspects of self, through the process of initiation and subsequent devotional practices, especially those involving trance and dissociation.

The initiation process itself is referred to as *fazer o santo* (to make the saint) and as a result, the process of becoming a medium is commonly abbreviated as being *feito* or “made.” The implications of this idiom have to do not only with formal installation of the Orixá into the initiate’s head, but also with the unmaking and making of self that takes place before and during the initiation. As Van Gennep famously demonstrated, rites of passage function to deconstruct existing selves so that they may be reconstructed in a new status (Van Gennep 1960). In the case of Candomblé, potential mediums arrive with selves that have already been divided by the experience of suffering and conflict (Seligman 2005b). Initiation serves first to formalize the breakdown of the extant self.

Candomblé initiations traditionally involve extended periods of seclusion within the *terreiro*, or Candomblé center, during which spiritual leaders and other adepts model proper ritual behavior for the initiate who is simultaneously learning of ritual secrets and obligations, songs, prayers, myths, and dances; eating and coming to recognize ritual foods; identifying medicinal herbs and learning healing practices; and participating in bodily transformations such as head shaving and ritual incision of the head (Bastide 2001; Prandi 2000; Wafer 1991).⁷ I argue that the self is unmade during this process in both symbolic and embodied ways, through practices meant to disassemble elements of the old self and simultaneously direct attention away from self-conscious awareness. In doing so, I believe these practices address the individual’s experience of suffering in two main ways: (1) by creating experiences that match the individual’s former suffering in their intensity, but do not have the same negative valence (i.e., sleeping on the floor, being isolated from friends and family, eating only ritual foods, shaving one’s head, all of which symbolically clear the way to the

ownership of the head by the Orixá, but also change the way the individual looks and feels); and (2) by keeping the individual's attention from being directed at previous suffering (i.e., seclusion from the everyday world, immersion in a different setting and living conditions, participation in novel and elaborate rituals, and learning of trance induction techniques involving intense focus of attention away from self-consciousness and onto rhythmic and repetitive stimuli like dance, singing–chanting, and drumming).

As a result, by their own report during their initiations mediums often experience their familiar self as distant, suspended, or absent. Many of my informants articulated this experience in terms of being in a constant state of *transe* (trance) during their initiation within the terreiro. By most observer accounts⁸ initiates actually tend to go in and out of trance during this period, and are most often possessed by their child spirit or *erê* (Wafer 1991). Hence, while trance is probably not literally constant during this time, by referring to constant or prolonged periods of dissociation initiates are communicating an intensely and consistently felt displacement of their taken-for-granted sense of being in the world—including the senses of identity, motivation, and coherence that ordinarily form the basis of their behavior. The fact that initiates are most often possessed by their *erê*, or child spirit, during this time suggests that connection to the adult self, with its life history, goals, and responsibilities is suspended during this time. Instead, the initiate possesses (or is possessed by) only a child-like or protoself.

The remaking of self in Candomblé initiation includes not only identification of an individual's Orixás, which helps to shape and contextualize psychological and emotional aspects of self, it also includes practices that shape and contextualize embodied aspects of self (Motta 2005; Prandi 2000). According to the Candomblé knowledge system, the body is not simply a neutral (stable) container occupied by different spirits but may itself display discontinuities when animated by a different consciousness. Thus, the physiology of the body may change to reflect differences in the occupying spirit; and these differences can be seen in the movements of the possession dance. For instance, Oxalá,⁹ the most senior Orixá, dances with the hunched posture and slow deliberate movements of a wizened old man (Prandi 2000). This creates a focus on, and embodiment of, the Orixá's characteristics and further reinforces the notion that qualities of the body may be disconnected from the agency of the individual, and may not correspond to his or her prior self-concept.

Consequently, while possession by the Orixás may create the experience of one's body as a foreign object, this experience ceases to undermine the continuity of self. The experience of nonvolitional bodily responses becomes the embodiment of the Orixás, and the sense of uncontrol associated with physiological arousal becomes spiritually meaningful. This association of physiological arousal with spirituality means that even outside the ritual context, the individual is less likely to connect such arousal to a stressful stimulus and to negatively value it. Embedding potentially alienating bodily experience in a meaningful context not only reconciles this experience with cognized self-representations, but affects those bodily experiences themselves by shaping patterns of attention that in turn affect what information is processed (Kirmayer and Sartorius 2007). Rather than being reinforced, escalated, and

continuing to dominate awareness, such experiences become part of the background again. Hence, internalization of a contextual shift for attributing meaning to embodied experience becomes a tool for the self-regulation of arousal.

Psychophysiological data gathered from initiated mediums support the notion that immersion into this spiritual system may aid in the self-regulation of arousal. A lack of longitudinal data limits what I can know at this time with certainty about change across time, but mediums displayed a pattern of autonomic nervous system control over arousal during baseline recordings of heart rate variability that distinguished them from nonmedium religious adepts (Seligman n.d.). The pattern of autonomic control displayed by mediums indicates a heightened capacity for self-regulation of arousal, which may be either a product or cause of the capacity to engage in the embodied practices of Candomblé. This pattern likely relates to the capacity to voluntarily enter trance and dissociative states. Specifically, mediums on average displayed scores for combined parasympathetic (inhibitory) and sympathetic (excitatory) nervous system control over heart rate (HR) that were half a standard deviation higher than those of nonmedium initiates (Seligman and Brown 2009).¹⁰ Higher levels of autonomic control facilitate dynamic shifts in heart rate that represent a heightened ability to respond to (i.e., with increased HR) and recover from (i.e., with quick return to lower HR) challenges in the environment (Berntson et al. 2008; Seligman n.d.).

This pattern of autonomic control is in sharp contrast with the negative patterns of psychosomatic response that mediums report prior to initiation. The somatic suffering experienced by preinitiation mediums suggest cycles of symptom amplification and distress more likely to be associated with psychophysiological reactivity and poor control of arousal. These data suggest that immersion into Candomblé belief and practice may change patterns of autonomic control, and promote healing of psychophysiological selves. Such an interpretation is supported by the positive self-reports of mediums, in which they describe recovery from the somatic ills that caused them to become initiated. Mediums also consistently reported never suffering from such somatic crises again (Seligman 2005a, b). For example, one medium, who sought help from Candomblé for a medically unexplained rash covering her whole body, reported that after initiation “My life changed plenty . . . [now] I don’t have illness any more.”

These reports do not indicate that these mediums never get sick again. It was not uncommon for mediums to talk about current problems, yet the mediumship narratives of most of those I interviewed were narratives of recovery. What this discursive practice is intended to communicate, I would argue, is not that the body was healed of a particular illness at a particular time or that it has become immune to illness. Instead this discursive practice is intended to communicate the healing of the embodied self.

As Csordas has insightfully argued, spiritual healing is often incremental, and it is a reorientation toward symptoms that actually constitutes the healing (1983). Mediums gain a religious frame within which to interpret their subsequent suffering, and the availability of such attributions means that suffering is less likely to undermine the sense of self and

cause a distressing sense of division. New physical or existential ills become part and parcel of an ongoing concern with fulfilling ritual obligations; they are a source of concern and attention as symptoms or signs of the Orixás' displeasure and are addressed through religious practice. Such practice, in turn, has the effect of diverting attention from symptoms or misfortunes, interrupting cycles of symptom amplification, and retuning physiological arousal.

Case Studies

Not only is self-healing an incremental process, but it is also a variable one—both in terms of how it exerts its effects and also the degree to which it is efficacious for each individual. While there is a general pattern of transformation through which Candomblé participation acts to heal conflicted and divided selves, the effects may also be more idiosyncratic and act in individual-by-individual ways. The idiosyncrasies of the self-healing process match the idiosyncrasies of each person's life, their particular experiences and characteristics, and the forms of suffering that bring them to be initiated. The result is a different kind of fit between the needs of each individual, and the structure and content of the religion. For instance, some people are motivated to model their behavior anew and to thoroughly restructure their personality. For others it is more important to objectify certain aspects of existing personality, and separate them from self—to avoid dissonance by distancing elements of thought and behavior to the personality and agency of the Orixá (Motta 2005). Yet I argue that for all, it is the balance of practice and discourse that most powerfully contributes to self-healing.

Using a comparison of two cases, I illustrate both the regularities and individual differences in how the multiplicity of healing modalities in Candomblé knowledge and practice act to help individuals reestablish a sense of coherence and aid in resynchronizing self-processes.¹¹ The case materials that follow are drawn from the spiritual life history narratives of two mediums I worked with in Salvador. Both cases are similar to the other nine mediums with whom I worked in terms of the general pattern of experience of suffering, initiation into Candomblé, and experience of recovery associated with initiation. But each is also unique in the details of the suffering experienced, and in aspects of the self-healing process.¹²

Lucia

At the time that I met her, Dona Lucia was a lively, warm, 62-year-old who had been an initiated *filha de santo* (lit., “daughter of saint,” the term for initiated mediums) for 30 years. She was a respected, senior member of her Candomblé community, but the story of how she came to be initiated makes it clear that this is in sharp contrast to the way her relationship with Candomblé began. Like most mediumship narratives I collected, Lucia's centers around the suffering she experienced prior to becoming initiated. The particular forms of suffering Lucia recounted consisted especially of anxiety, guilt, and emotional instability. Lucia attributes her suffering to several different causes: first, she describes suffering from extreme anxiety in the context of her political activism during the military dictatorship.

According to Lucia, after several close calls, her anxiety over being caught by the military police and thrown into jail, raped, beaten, tortured, or killed (Brazilian National Archives: “Dereito à Memória e à Verdade” 2007) became so extreme that it dominated all of her attention, preventing her from focusing on anything else, and forcing her to drop out of college. Her experience of this extreme fear and anxiety caused her to be, in her own words, *traumatizada* (traumatized).

Second, Lucia describes the extreme guilt she suffered in relation to her father’s death, around the same time (when she was in her mid-twenties). Burdened with helping to care for her father, who was debilitated after suffering a stroke, Lucia held herself responsible for her father’s death after she fell asleep while caring for him. Her father suffered a crisis that landed him back in the hospital where he died several weeks later. After her father’s death Lucia reports that she was “no longer the same person . . . I was not normal.” She was overwhelmed by grief and guilt and became more and more emotionally unstable. She became paranoid, suffered delusions, went into rages in which she threw things at her mother. Psychiatric medication did not control her emotional volatility, and Lucia feared that if she was committed she might then commit suicide.

Eventually a friend suggested that she seek help in Candomblé, and she ended up being initiated at the terreiro where she remains a *filha de santo* today. Like many Candomblé mediums, Lucia believes her initiation was transformative: the process turned her into, in her words, “the tranquil person” she is today.

Prior to their initiations, mediums tend to be vulnerable to the negative cycles of attention, somatic distress, and corporeal alienation described above. In Lucia’s case the intrusive effects of anxiety on attention prevented her from being able to concentrate on her studies, causing her to drop out of college. The feedback between anxiety and physiological response also sensitized Lucia to other stressors, making her vulnerable to negative effects from the trauma of losing her father. As Lucia puts it, the trauma of her father’s death had a particularly strong effect on her because of “the type of person” she was at the time: “sensitive.”

The somatic effects and sense of alienation from body that Lucia experienced are apparent in her recollection of how she responded to the headaches she commonly suffered at the time: she was so distanced from herself that she describes banging her head into a wall, listening to the sound it made, and wondering about its effects on her body in the third person, thinking to herself, “let’s see if she breaks it [her head] today.”

The disruption of self Lucia experienced is underscored by the fact that during this preinitiation period she spontaneously dissociated (in her words, “went into trance”) while in a high stress situation—when she was about to undergo uterine surgery. Although she has since made spiritual meaning of this dissociative experience, at the time Lucia did not possess the frame of reference necessary to symbolically smooth over this profound disruption of self with religious attributions. The fact that this spontaneous episode of dissociation

did not have symbolic meaning for her at the time supports the idea that it was a response to acute anxiety. Her dissociation occurred as part of a larger pattern of self-fragmentation in the context of trauma and emotional suffering (Seligman and Kirmayer 2008).

Lucia's own expectations, goals, and desires and her ability to conform to social expectations (Seligman 2005b), were derailed by multiple acutely stressful life events, which ultimately resulted in severe embodied suffering. Her profound suffering led Lucia to experience a sense of alienation from her life, her mood, and her behavior, none of which matched her self-concept or self-expectations, and all of which violated her sense of control. She became a foreign person to herself, someone who was "not normal."

Hence, Lucia entered her initiation process with a self already deeply fragmented. Initiation further disrupted her ties to the taken for granted elements of her personhood, including relationships (she left her mother and siblings), setting-context (she not only entered the terreiro for a period of isolation but also uprooted herself further by changing cities as well), and goals (she abandoned her job, her hopes for university). Like many other mediums, Lucia's articulation of the liminality of this period included reporting an extended episode of trance: as she put it, "I stayed in erê-trance almost one month."

The initiation process and internalization of the logic of self in Candomblé contributed to the healing and reshaping of Lucia's fragmented sense of self through multiple channels. First, identification of Oxalá, the oldest and wisest of the Orixás, as the owner of her head gave Lucia the opportunity to identify with his calmness, wisdom, kindness, and tranquility. Although it seems as though it would have been hard for a young woman to identify with and adopt the characteristics of the oldest of the Orixás, Lucia describes her transformation as immediate. Prior to her initiation, Lucia identified herself as high-strung, sensitive, and emotionally volatile; afterward, she says she became "tranquil." Her initiation thus figures as a turning point in her self-narrative (Bruner 1994), and although her account is retrospective, as I have argued elsewhere, behavioral transformations of the kind Lucia describes are potentiated by new self-understandings of the kind articulated in this turning-point narrative (Seligman 2005a).

Thus, mediumship helped Lucia to restructure her identity as well as her personality, by giving her the role of medium on which to anchor, and to use as a framework for restructuring her self-narrative. All of the suffering and emotional volatility she experienced prior to initiation she now sees as symptoms of her spiritual affliction, rather than as characteristics of her true self. As she puts it, "after I was made, I became a different person—no longer the same . . . as before. Really I went through a process of [self] recognition."

Lucia impressed me as exceptionally calm and deliberate in our interactions. She projects a sense of peacefulness and wisdom, through her slow movement, slow and precise speech, and her remarkable thoughtfulness. With thirty years as a medium at her terreiro and an influential (although not particularly lucrative)¹³ job at a museum related to Afro-Brazilian culture, Lucia has positioned herself as both a religious and a cultural expert and spends a

good deal of time mentoring younger spiritual adepts as well as researchers interested in Candomblé. Hence, she embodies in her social identity the qualities of Oxalá.

As well, Lucia learned to embody the physical characteristics of her primary deity: she learned the stooped posture and slow deliberate movements of Oxalá, which she took on whenever she was possessed. Aging has only reinforced Lucia's identification with the senior deity. For example, as a result of arthritis Lucia has a somewhat hunched posture and walks with a slow, shuffling gait and a slight limp even when she is not possessed. In addition, Oxalá is unable to eat foods containing salt or sugar, and Lucia explained to me that she too is unable to eat salt or sugar because she suffers from both diabetes and hypertension. Although she understands her diabetes and hypertension as hereditary, she views them not as illness or affliction, but rather as physical manifestations of her connection to her Orixá. This belief helps prevent her from feeling alienated from her body, and protects her from having to struggle to incorporate chronic illness or a "sick role" into her self-concept. In addition, these ailments demand her focus and attention to her body at times but not in ways that undermine her normal patterns of self-awareness, because this self-awareness is already punctuated by moments of embodied identification with her Orixá of which her illnesses have now become a part.

Similarly, internalization of the idea that body and self may be detached has also allowed Lucia to detach from her distressing physiological responses by attending to them differently. It is my belief that this shift has disrupted the escalating feedback between attention and arousal that is evident in her recollection of the extreme anxiety and emotional volatility she experienced prior to initiation.

In addition, the practice elements of Candomblé structure attention in such a way that they may help avert cycles of symptom amplification in the first place. For Lucia, Candomblé devotion means daily practice: when I knew her, she lived in a small building on the grounds of her terreiro, and was responsible for tending the terreiro's shrine to Oxalá. She made frequent offerings to Oxalá and other deities, and not simply to petition them for help with a particular problem, but as acts of regular maintenance to her relationship with the gods. I witnessed the painstaking, methodical attention Lucia devoted to such acts of devotion and her absorption in the knowledge surrounding them, when she helped me and a friend of mine to create an offering to one of our Orixás. The degree of absorption she demonstrated in the ritual process suggested that tuning in to these practices with such intensity was especially therapeutic for her.

In addition, trance induction training, which involves learning to narrowly concentrate attention on the music and movement of possession rituals, and hence to dissociate in response to specific cues, actually helped Lucia learn to control and manipulate her own attention, arousal, and awareness, making the distancing of self from body meaningful, predictable, and contextual. As mentioned above, psychophysiological data suggest that the effects of this spiritual system on self may include the retuning of cardiac autonomic processes, such that practicing mediums like Lucia end up with a distinctive capacity to respond

dynamically to stress (Berntson et al. 2008; Seligman n.d.; Seligman and Brown 2009). By addressing discontinuities and fragmentation at multiple levels of self-experience, being “made” allowed Lucia’s previously damaged, suffering self to recombine and become a self she could recognize as her own again.

Pedro

Pedro had been a *filho de santo* for nine years when I interviewed him. He was a big, jovial man in his mid-thirties who exuded a kind of restless energy. Like Lucia, Pedro narrated his spiritual life history in terms of a pattern of suffering, and yet his suffering was different from hers. According to Pedro, “it was a certain problem that brought me to approach the axé . . . I started to have problems with ‘discussions’ in the street . . . I would fight over any nonsense, and I was drinking a lot.” Analysis of his narrative suggests that these problems were symptoms of a larger pattern of existential suffering, also manifested in his constant drift between places, religions, and occupations.

Pedro’s narrative centered in particular around his inability to find a vocation: “I worked for a transport company, afterwards with a physical therapist, after that in a supermarket. It was always like this, revolving.” It seems likely that structural factors contributed to his inability to find and keep a good job—as an Afro-Brazilian and a homosexual, Pedro belongs to a particularly marginalized population. He channeled his energies and frustrations into street and beach life instead, expressing his alienation through embodied behaviors: drinking too much and getting into fights. His dissatisfaction with his life and the conflict he experienced during this time were demonstrated by his restless search for greater fulfillment in the form of different jobs, moving to a different city (Rio) and back, and serial participation in different religions, including Catholicism, Baptist Christianity, Mesa Branca (a religion with Afro-Brazilian and Spiritist elements), and Candomblé. His story also documents a prolonged period of approach and withdrawal from Candomblé, drifting back to drinking and fighting, being fired from additional jobs, before finally becoming initiated. Each time he approached Candomblé, he would, in his own terms, *passar mal* (become sick), fainting on several different occasions.¹⁴ A number of Mães de Santo informed him that he must be made, but he resisted.

It is not uncommon for mediums to speak of their initial resistance to becoming initiated (Seligman 2005b). But unlike most other narratives I collected, Pedro described being miserable during his initiation: “I was unable to leave, and if I could have, I would have left . . . I never thought that I would make it through [the initiation process].” Yet his narrative ends with the same subjective experience of healing and transformation. While Pedro has continued to drift somewhat in terms of his vocation, he no longer describes feeling a sense of dissatisfaction and existential crisis as a result: “Today I find myself a person unemployed for two years. But I’m not desperate . . . I am taking advantage of this moment.” Moreover, he reports no longer falling into the negative patterns of behavior he had engaged in prior to initiation: “in terms of fighting, today I am a more tranquil person. I am calm, very calm . . . I understand fights, I also try to make peace. But when I see that peace is not going to reign in

that moment, I prefer to remove myself.” Pedro feels like a different person: he is able to resist acting on anger and find peace and tranquility where previously there was none.

For Pedro, the way that this self-transformation was effected differs in important ways from Lucia’s process. Pedro’s identification of his primary Orixá, the warrior god Ogum, provided a model for making attributions about already present personality traits rather than a model around which to thoroughly reshape his personality. As Pedro now understands it, Ogum is responsible for his aggression and fighting, and his attraction to the street life. Yet he has also resisted certain elements of this model, stating for example: “my Mãe de Santo said that people of Ogum like to work in the street, work as vendors, but I think that . . . the Orixá in one is a protection, the Orixá in one is peace and equilibrium, so I don’t think that I have to take part in everything of the Orixá, that . . . because the Orixá likes this, I have to be vending something.” Instead, he expressed a sense of certainty that he could be a professional, and about finding the right profession. When I interviewed him, he was taking a course to be a medical assistant. Thus, he distinguished between the Orixá elements of self, and other elements of self: “this is a thing I want to do, a thing I like, it is a thing that is mine.” Yet rather than creating a greater sense of division, being able to distance certain elements of his former self and behavior as coming from the Orixá, has helped to reduce Pedro’s experience of dissonance.

Hence, while Pedro’s self-transformation has above all been a behavioral transformation, this behavioral transformation has been facilitated by shifts in cognition and attention. Attributing his negative tendencies to the characteristics of his Orixá allowed Pedro to contextualize and accept these characteristics, but also served to objectify them: they became at once self and not-self. This process of objectification in turn allowed Pedro to gain some emotional distance as well as cognitive and behavioral control over these previously automatic and embodied, yet dissonant, aspects of self. As he stated, he still understands fighting—he can see how reactive responses to situations occur, and can relate to the anger and aggression that result—but he is now capable of trying to make peace instead. In other words, there is now enough cognitive control, and a built-in attribution to the Orixá, that allow him to attend to his own embodied responses differently, and to avoid reactive and aggressive behaviors.

Although in Pedro’s story the embodied elements of suffering and self-conflict are less obvious than some others, they are still important. Pedro’s very existential suffering had its sources in aspects of his embodied self, in the sense that his blackness and homosexuality were almost certainly factors in his employment problems. The sense that these embodied aspects of self represented obstacles to his ability to find a vocation likely contributed to an underlying sense of self-conflict. In addition, Pedro’s story is about experiencing a lack of control over self, and, as Csordas points out, it is the experience of a lack of control over certain thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that make individuals feel “other” (1983). Pedro’s lack of control was expressed through out of control embodied behaviors like drinking and fighting, and his description of his descent into such behaviors indicates that his emotions and actions during that period felt other—that these embodied aspects of self did not feel

integrated with, and were not under the control of, his cognized self. Thus, although somatization (in the sense of unexplained illness) was not a source of self-disruption for Pedro, his existential suffering nevertheless had important embodied dimensions.

Interestingly, Pedro also associates with his spiritual calling an experience of extreme physical suffering (an abscessed tooth) he endured years before his initiation despite the fact that this problem was probably healed by the antibiotics he was prescribed by a dentist. Nevertheless, inclusion of this story suggests that Pedro experienced this physical suffering as alienating, and as part of his larger experience of existential distress, embodied suffering, and dissonance.¹⁵

The embodied dimensions of his suffering and self-disruption relate to the centrality of the practice elements of Candomblé in Pedro's transformation as well. It is clear from interacting with him, that Pedro has an enormous amount of cognitive and physical energy. Because of his inability to find and keep a satisfying job, prior to his initiation much of Pedro's energy turned to frustration and was released as aggression. The practice elements of Candomblé give Pedro an alternative outlet into which he can channel his energies and his attention. Moreover, by embodying the characteristics of his Orixá while possessed, Pedro has the opportunity to enact the powerful, aggressive movements of his warrior god; he is able to transform into the great and savage Ogum (Bastide 2001). This opportunity allows Pedro to direct his aggressive tendencies and energies into his ritual performances.

It is worth noting that Pedro's unsatisfying experience with the Mesa Branca religion is probably related to his need for the Candomblé embodied practices. Pedro complained that Mesa Branca was "like going to a meeting—you just sat there and had a meeting and then went away." His need for a more embodied religious experience was vividly demonstrated by his powerful embodied responses to Candomblé: every time he approached the religion prior to becoming initiated, he became sick or fainted.

Yet, unlike Lucia, Pedro's suffering was of a more continuous, low-grade nature, rather than an acute crisis. Hence, despite his inability to reach his goals, his inability to exercise control over certain elements of his embodied reactions to situations, and his ensuing alienation from elements of his personality and behavior, Pedro may not have come to his initiation as fragmented as did Lucia. This could help to explain his unusually negative experience with initiation; his extant self may have required more dismantling through initiation before rebuilding and reintegration could take place.

The differences in the subjective state of each individual at the time of initiation also relate to some of the differences in the process of transformation. Lucia has internalized and identified with everything about Oxalá, and completely reshaped her personality around the characteristics of her Orixá. Pedro, on the other hand, identifies with elements of Ogum, and this identification has shifted the way he attends to those elements of himself, but he rejects other parts of the connection to his deity. And while practice has played an important role in transforming his patterns of attention and behavior, and provided a key outlet for his

embodied tendencies, it does not have the same centrality for Pedro that it does for Lucia. Hence, these different people came to the religion in different states of disrepair, having experienced different forms of suffering and different threats to their subjectivity. The logic of Candomblé helped to heal them in somewhat different ways. However, the fundamentally embodied nature of self has meant that for both individuals, the feedback between cognitive and practice elements of the religion represents a central feature in the healing transformation facilitated by their participation.

Conclusion

In this article I build on the existing literature on self, embodiment, and religious healing, and add to it in three main ways: first, by detailing the way in which suffering causes and is caused by disrupted self-experience, as well as how such suffering may be alleviated through processes of self-transformation; second, by detailing the ways in which bodily suffering in particular is implicated in disruptions of self, such that cognitive elements of self are affected by bodily disruptions and vice versa; and, finally, by introducing more detailed information about the actual biological mechanisms and processes through which the embodied self is constituted, and through which self can be disrupted.

I contribute to the Candomblé literature by drawing connections among the suffering that often brings people to the religion, the practice-heavy nature of Candomblé, and the effects of this religious practice on the embodied self. Candomblé participation integrates social and rhetorical transformations of self with embodied dimensions of practice, to address disruptions of self at multiple levels. Immersion into the logic of Candomblé acts to direct individuals' attention to themselves in different ways, and this in turn has cascading effects on perception, information processing, and memory. Just as the disruption of self-regulatory processes at any level may threaten the coherence of the whole, stabilization of any given process can help to heal it: new cognitive attributions for emotional and physiological arousal help to stabilize emotional and physiological dysregulation; learning to control and manipulate attention and arousal helps individuals to rewrite self-narratives; reshaped self-representations help individuals to regain control over attention. As a result, the embodied self has the potential to re-cohere and be remade, through immersion in the logic and practice of Candomblé.

Just as anthropologists have leveled critiques against an ethnocentric view of self as discrete, autonomous, and unitary, I contribute to the discussion by presenting evidence in support of an understanding of self that moves beyond the social and rhetorical to include its bodily dimensions. This more holistic view of self is consistent both with the idea that selves may be shifting and contingent at the level of cognized self-representation, and that they are also typically phenomenologically coherent. I argue that the experience of coherence may be undermined by suffering, and that disruptions of the embodied self are mediated by biological processes, including the action of neural mechanisms related to information

processing and the allocation of attention, as well as activation of psychophysiological systems related to the regulation of arousal.

Research into the cultural and psychobodily dimensions of selfhood has particular implications for understanding the dynamics of therapeutic intervention. A more explicitly integrated understanding of how cognized aspects of self interact with psychobodily processes promises to improve understanding of how various therapies act to promote healing self-transformations. It would be interesting for example, to study a therapy like Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), a controversial therapy for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that includes both cognitive and embodied elements (Stein et al. 2004), or to examine a heavily embodied practice like Yoga, with this integrated model of self in mind. Such future research can illuminate to what extent therapeutic systems with different balances of embodied practice and cognitive restructuring are effective in contributing to healing self-transformations. Research of this nature can illustrate vividly how cultural systems of meaning and practice shape and reshape self experience, and offer insight into the role of culture in personal resiliency.

Rebecca Seligman is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Faculty Fellow at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University.

Notes

Acknowledgments. The field research presented in this article was supported by the National Institutes of Mental Health and the National Science Foundation. Special thanks to Laurence Kirmayer, William Dressler, and M. Cameron Hay for their comments on earlier drafts, as well as to the five anonymous readers for their comments. Thanks also to Janet Dixon Keller for her extremely helpful editorial insights. Finally, and most importantly, I thank the Candomblé mediums who generously agreed to participate in my study. All study participants gave informed consent in accordance with Institutional Review Board procedures.

1. See also the work of Ulric Neisser for an account of the role of information processing in self-experience (1988).
2. Certainly this process is potentiated in contexts in which a dualistic understanding of mind and body is present. However, somatic preoccupation has been shown to be a common idiom of distress in most cultural contexts studied (Kirmayer and Young 1998).
3. Data were gathered from participants in two Candomblé centers in Salvador. The spiritual leaders of both centers identified their Candomblés as belonging to the Nagô or Ketu (most traditionally Yoruba) *nação* of Candomblé. However, in practice, these Candomblés incorporated elements of less traditional, “syncretic” variants of the religion, including belief in and incorporation of *Caboclos* (Amerindian spirits). The two centers were located near each other and shared overlapping membership of mostly local people from the poor and working class neighborhood in which they were located.
4. For a description of this instrument’s psychometric properties see Santana 1982.
5. Interviews were conducted in Portuguese and transcribed by a Brazilian research assistant. All interview materials discussed and excerpted in this article are my own translations.

6. A Minnesota Instruments impedance cardiograph was used to generate electrocardiogram and impedance signals from which measures of sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system activity were extrapolated. For more information on this method and interpretation of these data see Berntson et al. 1993.
7. This is true within the Nagô tradition of Candomblé. Other *nações* (nations) within the Candomblé religion may have somewhat different initiation practices.
8. I was not able to directly observe initiations myself, as I did not have the proper ritual “clearance” (that is, being an initiate myself). I rely instead on the large amount of scholarship on this topic (Bastide 2001; Prandi 2000; Verger 1981), as well as my interviews with 21 Candomblé initiates, 2 Candomblé spiritual leaders, and my extensive interaction with a key informant who is an initiate.
9. This elderly Oxalá is just one of many variants of this deity found within the Nagô sect of Candomblé. However, my informants, despite considering themselves part of the Nagô *nação*, actually practiced a more syncretic form of Candomblé involving Caboclo worship (see note 4), and did not identify multiple variants of each Orixá.
10. Differences between the two groups did not reach significance, probably because of limited power from the small sample size. But on average, the combined parasympathetic (High Frequency Heart Rate variability, HF) and sympathetic (Pre-ejection Period, PEP) scores (calculated as $HF + PEP = CAR$) of mediums were half a standard deviation higher than those of their nonmedium counterparts (Seligman and Brown 2009; Seligman n.d.).
11. On the one hand, the retrospective and subjective nature of these data limits analysis of the efficacy of the self-healing process; clearly longitudinal data would be preferable. On the other hand, this article is about subjective experience; as the questions it addresses involve individuals’ experiences of themselves, their narratives of past experience, transformation, and embodied identification with the Orixás are, in a sense, the most relevant of all forms of data.
12. Details of Dona Lucia’s and Pedro’s stories are also recounted in Seligman 2005b.
13. I never asked Lucia what her income was, but her living conditions were consistent with a working-class lifestyle.
14. Fainting by the uninitiated at Candomblé rituals is typically interpreted as *bolar no santo*, or rolling to the saint, a sign that one needs to be initiated (Van de Port 2005).
15. Inclusion of this experience also serves the instrumental purpose of fitting Pedro’s story to the conventions of mediumship narratives and legitimizing it as a narrative of affliction as discussed in Seligman 2005b.

References Cited

- Ahearn, Laura
2001 Language and Agency. *Annual Reviews in Anthropology* 30: 109–137.
- Barsalou, Lawrence, W.Kyle Simmons, Aron Barbey, and Christine Wilson
2003 Grounding Conceptual Knowledge in Modality Specific Systems. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 7(2): 84–91.
- Bastide, Roger
2001 *O Candomblé da Bahia*. Sao Paulo, Brazil: Companhia das Letras.
- Becker, Gaylene
1997 *Disrupted Lives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Berntson, Gary, John Cacioppo, and Karen Quigley
1993 Cardiac Psychophysiology and Autonomic Space in Humans: Empirical Perspectives and Conceptual Implications. *Psychological Bulletin* 114(2): 296–392.
- Berntson, Gary, Greg Norman, Louise Hawkey, and John Cacioppo
2008 Spirituality and Autonomic Cardiac Control. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 35: 198–208.

- Boddy, Janice
1993 Subversive Kinship: The Role of Spirit Possession in Negotiation Social Place in Rural Northern Sudan. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 16(2): 29–38.
- Brazilian National Archives
2007. *Dereito á Memória e á Verdade*. Comissão Especial Sobre Mortos e Desaparecidos Políticos, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
- Bruner, Jerome
1994 *The Remembered Self*. Ulric, Neisser, and Robin Fivush, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Csordas, Thomas
1983 The Rhetoric of Transformation in Ritual Healing. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 7(4): 333–375.
1990 Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology. *Ethos* 18(1): 5–47.
1993 Somatic Modes of Attention. *Cultural Anthropology* 8(2): 135–156.
1994a *The Sacred Self*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
1994b Words from the Holy People: A Case Study in Cultural Phenomenology. *In Embodiment and Experience*. Thomas Csordas, ed. Pp. 269–290. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Damasio, Antonio
1995 *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Das, Veena, and Ranendra Das
2007 How the Body Speaks: Illness and the Lifeworld among the Urban Poor. *In Subjectivity*. João Biehl, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman, eds. Pp. 66–97. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ellis-Hill, Caroline, Sheila Payne, and Christopher Ward
2000 Self-Body Split: Issues of Identity in Physical Recovery Following a Stroke. *Disability and Rehabilitation* 22(16): 725–733.
- Ewing, Katherine
1990 The Illusion of Wholeness: Culture, Self, and the Experience of Inconsistency. *Ethos* 18(3): 251–278.
- Farmer, Paul
1997 On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below. *In Social Suffering*. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, eds. Pp. ix–xxvii. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Froelich, Werner
1978 Stress, Anxiety, and the Control of Attention: A Psychophysiological Approach. *In Stress and Anxiety*, vol. 5. Charles Spielberger and Irwin Sarason, eds. Pp. 99–130. Washington, DC: Hemisphere.
- Fuchs, Thomas
2001 The Tacit Dimension. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* 8(4): 323–326.
- Graham, George, and G.Lynn Stephens
1994 *Mind and Mine*. *In Philosophical Psychopathology*. George Graham and G.Lynn Stephens, eds. Pp. 91–109. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Green, Linda
1998 Lived Lives and Social Suffering: Problems and Concerns in Medical Anthropology. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 12(1): 3–7.
- Hallowell, Alfred Irving
1955 *The Self and Its Behavioral Environment*. *In Culture and Experience*. Alfred Irving Hallowell, ed. Pp. 75–110. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hollan, Douglas
1992 Cross-Cultural Differences in the Self. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 48(4): 283–300.
2004 Self Systems, Cultural Idioms of Distress, and the Psycho-Bodily Consequences of Childhood Suffering. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 41(1): 62–79.
- Johnson, Paul Christopher
2002 *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kagan, Jerome
1994 *Galen's Prophecy*. New York: Basic.
- Kirmayer, Laurence J.
1994 Pacing the Void: Social and Cultural Dimensions of Dissociation. *In Dissociation*. David Spiegel, ed. Pp. 91–122. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.
- Kirmayer, Laurence J., and Allan Young
1998 Culture and Somatization: Clinical, Epidemiological, and Ethnographic Perspectives. *Psychosomatic Medicine* 60: 420–430.
- Kirmayer, Laurence J., and Norman Sartorius
2007 Cultural Models and Somatic Syndromes. *Psychosomatic Medicine* 69: 832–840.
- Kleinman, Arthur, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock
1997 Introduction. *In Social Suffering*. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, eds. Pp. ix–xxvii. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Kontos, Pia
2006 Embodied Selfhood: An Ethnographic Exploration of Alzheimer's Disease. *In* *Thinking about Dementia*. Annette Leibing and Lawrence Cohen, eds. Pp. 195–217. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson
1999 *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic.
- Lawler, Kathleen, and Lori Schmied
1988 Allocation of Attention and Physiological Responsivity in Type A Coronary-Prone Individuals. *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 67(1): 103–113.
- LeDoux, Joseph
2002 *Synaptic Self*. New York: Penguin Viking.
- Legrand, Dorothee
2006 The Bodily Self: The Sensori-Motor Roots of Pre-Reflective Self-Consciousness. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 5(1): 89–118.
- Leventhal, Howard, Ellen Idler, and Elaine Leventhal
1999 The Impact of Chronic Illness on the Self System. *In* *Self, Social Identity, and Physical Health*. Richard Contrada and Richard Ashmore, eds. Pp. 185–108. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, I. M.
1971 *Ecstatic Religion*. London: Routledge.
- Lewis, Michael
1992 Individual Differences in Response to Stress. *Pediatrics* 90(3): 487–490.
- Lock, Margaret
1999 The Politics of Health, Identity, and Culture. *In* *Self, Social Identity, and Physical Health*. Richard Contrada and Richard Ashmore, eds. Pp. 43–70. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mauss, Marcel
1985 A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of the Person; The Notion of the Self. W. Halls, trans. *In* *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes, eds. Pp. 1–25. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Merlau-Ponty, Maurice
1962 *Phenomenology of Perception*. C. Smith, trans. New York: Routledge.
- Morris, David
1997 About Suffering: Voice, Genre, and Moral Community. *In* *Social Suffering*. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, eds. Pp. 25–46. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Motta, Roberto
2005 Body Trance and Word Trance in Brazilian Religion. *Current Sociology* 53(2): 293–308.
- Neisser, Ulric
1988 Five Kinds of Self Knowledge. *Philosophical Psychology* 1(1): 35–59.
- Porges, Stephen
1991 Vagal Tone: An Autonomic Mediator of Affect. *In* *The Development of Emotion Regulation and Disregulation*. Judy Garber and Kenneth Dodge, eds. Pp. 111–128. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Prandi, Reginaldo
2000 African God in Contemporary Brazil: A Sociological Introduction to Candomblé Today. *International Sociology* 15(4): 641–663.
- Quinn, Naomi
2006 The Self. *Anthropological Theory* 6(3): 362–384.
- Richards, John
1987 Infant Visual Sustained Attention and Respiratory Sinus Arrhythmia. *Child Development* 58(2): 488–496.
- Rosaldo, Michelle
1984 Toward an Anthropology of Self and Feeling. *In* *Culture Theory*. Richard Shweder and Robert LeVine, eds. Pp. 137–157. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rothbart, Mary
1989 Biological Processes in Temperament. *In* *Temperament in Childhood*. Geldolph Kohnstamm, John Bates, and Mary Rothbart, eds. Pp. 77–110. New York: Wiley.
- Santana, Vilma
1982 Estudo Epidemiológico as Doenças Mentais em um Bairro de Salvador. *Serie de Estudo em Saude* 3: 122–130.
- Sass, Louis, and Josef Parnas
2001 Phenomenology of Self-Disturbances in Schizophrenia: Some Research Findings and Directions. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* 8(4): 347–356.

- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy, and Margaret Lock
1987 The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 1(1): 6–41.
- Seligman, Rebecca
2005a Distress, Dissociation, and Embodied Experience: Reconsidering the Pathways to Mediumship and Mental Health. *Ethos* 33(1): 71–99.
2005b From Affliction to Affirmation. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 42(2): 272–294.
N.d. Sometimes Affliction Is a Door: Embodiment and Self-Healing in Brazilian Candomblé. Unpublished MS, Department of Anthropology, Northwestern University.
- Seligman, Rebecca, and Laurence J. Kirmayer
2008 Dissociative Experience and Cultural Neuroscience: Narrative, Metaphor and Mechanism. *Culture, Medicine, Psychiatry* 32(1): 31–64.
- Seligman, Rebecca, and Ryan Brown
2009 Theory and Method at the Intersection of Anthropology and Cultural Neuroscience. *Social Cognitive Affective Neuroscience*:doi:10.1093/scan/nsp032.
- Selka, Stephen
2007 Mediated Authenticity: Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Brazilian Candomblé. *Nova Religio* 11(1): 5–30.
- Shutz, Alfred
1967 *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Shweder, Richard, and Edmund Bourne
1984 Does the Concept of the Person Vary Cross-Culturally? *In* *Culture Theory*. Richard Shweder and Robert LeVine, eds. Pp. 158–199. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spiegel, David, and Etzel Cardeña
1991 Disintegrated Experience: The Dissociative Disorders Revisited. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 100(3): 366–378.
- Stein, Debra, Cecile Rousseau, and Louise Lacroix
2004 Between Innovation and Tradition: The Paradoxical Relationship between Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing and Altered States of Consciousness. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 41(1): 5–30.
- Van de Port, Mattijs
2005 Candomblé in Pink, Green, and Black: Rescripting the Afro-Brazilian Heritage in the Public Sphere of Salvador, Bahia. *Social Anthropology* 13(1): 3–26.
- Van Gennep, Arnold
1960 *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Vergeer, Pierre
1981 *Orixás: Deuses Iorubás na Africa e no Novo Mundo*. Salvador, Brazil: Corrupio.
- Voeks, Robert
1997 *Sacred Leaves of Candomblé*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Wafer, James
1991 *The Taste of Blood*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.