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THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

CAROLYN SMITH-MORRIS



KEYWORDS: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), culture, medical anthropology, fight-or-flight response

IN HIS CLINICAL Anecdote, Dr. Christopher Bailey gamely imagines the evolutionary underpinnings of his patient's distressing lack of war wounds. As part of a careful and engaged discussion of care for his suffering patient, Dr. Bailey suggests that our evolved fight-or-flight response to the alarms of the African savannah may be at work in Colin's distress. The fight-or-flight response is something of great interest to anthropologists, who rely on Darwin's theory of evolution to explain much in human experience. According to Dr. Bailey's application of the theory, Colin's visceral response to threat is protective in the presence of danger, but destructive (particularly to his mental health) in the absence of such challenges. So Dr. Bailey considers whether we may have an evolved "need" for threat, and that Colin's trauma is in part related to the lack of such threat in his wartime experience.

According to Darwin's ideas, evolved traits may be adaptive but may also simply be random appearances that have not *yet* produced cause for evolutionary eradication. The fight-or-flight response, or any of the hypothalamic-pituitary-

adrenal axis events initiated under either acute or chronic stress, is therefore occurring in Colin's reactions to everyday frustrations, to wartime exposures, and even during the stressful nontrauma of feeling "wimpy." Dr. Bailey's idea about an evolved need for threat is tautological. That need is not biological, but cultural.

Although post-traumatic stress disorder is medically real, it is an event that develops in a particular place and time. Likewise, gender roles that demand scar battles and trophies of a certain form are culturally determined. Culture is central to this anecdote: a culture-specific occurrence of post-traumatic stress disorder and culturally driven gender roles for men, especially warriors. Stress is indeed present in Colin's life: our post-industrial culture's separation from everyday death and violence make episodes like war and combat all the more shocking or traumatic; the lack of social recognition for his service also seems to be one of Colin's stressors. Both the shock of warfare and the trauma of his social invisibility are as vivid to his evolutionarily informed body as is the presence of a crouching lioness in the room. So it is the host of cultural expectations, and his inability to mobilize social and cognitive resources to respond to them, that is wounding Colin. Talk therapy should draw out these cultural details

and, as Dr. Bailey has already begun to do, emplot Colin into a more heroic (his)story of his service to our nation.

REFERENCE

Bailey, C. 2009. A painful lack of wounds. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 16, no. 3:223–224.