Sociological Perspectives on Organ Donation Against the Backdrop of Various Religions

Introduction

"Donation after cardiac death was once the only form of transplantation from deceased donors — until 40 years ago, when doctors began using cessation of brain activity as a way to determine death," writes Francis Delmonico in a New York Times article. Doctors were wary of using organs too close after cardiac death because sometimes the heart can spontaneously start again, whereas using organs when the brain is dead lets the organs have a continual supply of nutrients until moments before the transplant without the risk of restarting itself (Demonico). More than 90,000 people are waiting for a transplant nationwide, but many of those people die because deaths where organs can be retrieved are less prominent (Ramirez 2006: 2). Because the body symbolically represents various values and characteristics, many religions have conflicts when talking about the integrity of the body and distribution of organs to other individuals.

When talking about organ donation and a the possibility of someone donating, often their religion's beliefs will be one of the first places consulted on whether or not it is the proper thing to do in the eyes of their god, community, etc. Their decision will also change based on their community's previous stance and history of action on the issue. Deciding to donate can go two ways: choosing to donate because their religion supports an individual making personal decisions to be altruistic versus choosing not to donate based on communal standards of choice and end of life decisions. Even knowing that donating these organs my save tons of lives, many individuals still choose not to because of their holistic approach of the mind, body, and spirit and what may happen if any piece of that is

removed and distributed elsewhere, compromising a delicate balance in someone's reality and beyond life body.

I researched Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, and Native American traditions in order to evaluate how much a persons' decision to proceed with organ donation is rooted in their religion, rather than simply their personal want or need to give such a "gift," as Westerners call it. Using a New York Times article, scholarly journals, personal experience, classical sociological thought, and the Gift of Life Information packet, the importance of religion, and thus society's beliefs about individual responsibility, sanctity of the body, and how the mind, body, and spirit operates together, help form a collective idea about the influence of social institutions, like religion, on decisions regarding medical procedures.

Judaism, Orthodox Law, and Complementary and Alternative Medicine

Judaism has an element of respect for the body that is derived from their holy book, the Torah. It is presumed that they will protect the integrity of the body before and after death, but with one exception, saving a human life (Campbell 1998: 291). However, many rabbis insist that the organs only be taken when they have an immediately practical benefit to a needy patient, so there are limitations on how the organs can be removed (Campbell 1998: 291). In New York Times article titled *A Medical Dimension to a Religious Debate,* Rabbi Flaum supports Campbell's argument by stating, "he supported organ donation in principle but wanted the "when, why and where" of donation to be specific" (Ramirez 2006: 4). This is much like complementary and alternative medicine, where a whole is valued over the part and the entire being is worked on and evaluated as opposed to one specific part. In complementary and alternative medicine, many people will

continue to see their primary physician, but also start alternative medicine practices to enhance their treatments. Along the same line, many alternative medicine patients still go to a regular physician, but they continue to pair their traditional care with treatments that may not be accepted as scientific or proven to be successful in a medical journal, like acupuncture, for example (Astin 1998). Dr. John Astin concludes that many people who continue to see an alternative medicine healer find that these practices are "more congruent with their own values, beliefs, and philosophical orientations," implying that this type of treatment might not be right for all individuals. Similarly, organ donation might not be this logical, altruistic choice that Westerners make it out to be, rather highly dependent on social factors.

The situation becomes more intense when Jewish law is followed more strictly, such as in the Orthodox lifestyle. Kieran Healy discusses the hurdles of assimilating organ donation into preexisting Jewish law and practice, but there are those who are in favor of donating as well (2002:14). Many rabbis claim that because organ donation doesn't supersede any of the three cardinal sins (idolatry, adultery, and murder), then it is technically upholding the requirement to safe a life. This becomes difficult when asked to define death, a pulsing heart, and what it means to be living (cardiac life vs. brain activity) (Healy 2002:14).

Catholicism and Shamans

Catholicism seems more open to the idea of human tissue banking than Judaism because they do not require that the use be of immediate and specific benefit, as many Jews do (Campbell 1998: 296). The Catholic Church once viewed organ donation as mutilation, but now it can be seen as a charitable act (Rumsey 2003). Similarly within the

Christian faith, protestant beliefs can range from very liberal to very conservative, especially with issues of body integrity. However, it is enough to say that most Christians agree that Jesus teaches his followers to love one another. Like many other religions, altruistic acts are celebrated and if something can be done to save someone's life, Christians often take on a role of personal responsibility, helping others when in need (Campbell 1998: 293).

Something similar happens when some shamans are called to be healers. First, the spirits will make them sick and in order for them to get better, they must answer the call to be a healer (Handelman 1967: 63). It mirrors a possible Christian perspective of an all-knowing, more powerful being making decisions that affect the courses of people's lives. Even the Gift of Life organization, which mediates between the donors and hospitals for the organ transplants, is a nonprofit organization, lending its work to be volunteer and altruistic in nature (Gift of Life Organization 2007: 2/5/07).

Islam and traditional Chinese Medicine

The Islamic tradition deeply values the wholeness of the body upon death and does not agree with burying a body that that has been dissected and mutilated (Campbell 1998: 292). They do not even like bodies to be autopsied to find out the manner of death. Actually, in most medical schools, they still use animals to learn about anatomy (Campbell 1998: 294). There is a great connection between the brain, soul, and the rest of the body. Many believe that just because the heart has stopped beating, it doesn't mean that it is time to expire the mind or the soul (Sachedina 2005). At the same time, many followers of the Islamic religion do not believe that we as humans have the right to voluntarily die (ie, take ourselves off life support for any reason) (Sachedina 2005). Making end of life decisions,

especially when someone else's life is on the line, like in organ donation, becomes highly sensitive for the Muslim people.

In reading this article about the 'Islamic end-of-life view,' I saw a huge tendency to include the family, community, and any other concerned parties in the decision making process. He ends his article talking about life support and life sustaining treatment for those that are clearly terminally ill. He starts off by writing, "In Islam, the killing of a terminally ill person, whether through voluntary active euthanasia or physician assisted suicide, is judged an act of disobedience against God," but continues on to describe other situations where letting someone die might be acceptable – withholding treatment when there is no doubt that the suffering can't be relieved, etc. However, he ends the article by including that in order for any of these life-ending decisions to be made, "the structures of consultation between all the parties concerned about the wellbeing of the patient [need to be] in place" (Sachedina 2005). Much like Judaism operates within a community that works and believes together, Islam also highly values their society working together to make decisions about serious issues.

Just like in the case of Judaism and its connection with complementary and alternative medicine, Islam also has shares values with these practices. As we saw, Islam highly values the idea of the whole over the part and keeping the mind, body, and soul all working together to create a cohesive sense of self. This notion aligns with the pillars of alternative medicine and counters popular health care beliefs (Astin 1998). Another form of complementary care can be practiced through traditional Chinese medicine, defined as the use of herbs, meditation, tai chi, art, and many more preventative measure that are unseen in Western medicine. In traditional Chinese medicine, illness is described in terms

of chi, which has no real translation in English because it is more than a word, rather a feeling, emotion, experience, and a way of living. This energy is the key to the entire medical system (Moran 1983). Because health is more than an absence of disease, but rather a state of well being, many Chinese adults also practice daily exercises, called tai chi, and a low fat diet to maintain a wholesome lifestyle, preventing many illnesses that American's suffer from (Moran 1983). This speaks to the idea that many other cultures, including Judaism, Islam, and the Chinese, differ from the American idea that if we fix the part that is wrong, we can fix the whole system. The design of these other societies places emphasis on the entire being in conjunction with everyone and everything else in the universe, which brings us back to organ donation. These aforementioned cultures tend to have "stricter" thoughts and regulations on organ donation, which may be why the issue of disseminating parts of person is approached with a degree of seriousness. The balance of energy, chi, love, and integrity is central to their religion, beliefs, and lifestyle; therefore a decision about whether or not to dismantle one part of that (the body) renders a long discussion on what that does to the rest of the system (mind and soul).

Native American Traditions and the Hmong People

It is incorrect to say the 'Native American religions' because there are so many tribes and they differ in terms of specific values, beliefs, gods, etc., but some of the underling principles of these indigenous people are the same, especially when it comes to the sanctity of the body. For many Native Americans, there is also a holistic understanding of the body and mind, but they also believe that bodily remains are sacred (Campbell 1998: 297). Something that makes the Native Americans unique, however, is that fact that they value the whole over the part, the community over the individual, which is almost the

opposite of what many Americans hold as a value. In fact, often times community consent is needed in order to do any procedures involving tissue removal (Campbell 1998: 297). Cambell argues that if someone gets a procedure done without community consent, or it is an anonymous procedure, then the community is at risk of being hurt, more so than the individual (Campbell 1998: 297). This is similar to the Hmong family in Anne Fadiman's book The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down, where she mentions that many times, when Lia had to have blood drawn or a tissue taken, they would have to go the brother, dad, granddad, and up to the community leader just for it to be ok to take some of her tissue (Fadiman 1997: 47). Native Americans seem to be the most holistic in incorporating medicine with their culture and religion, using all of their resources of community living.

Durkheim: Sacred and Profane

Another important aspect to consider is whether the body and choices made affecting one's personhood range in the area of sacred or profane. Durkheim writes about religion's function within society and that by naming different aspects of our life as sacred or profane, we tell a lot about how we form actions around those definitions (1967:508). For example, Orthodox Judaism clearly states that the Torah and Jewish law are sacred and to be followed in life decisions, worshipped by its virtues, and ultimately respected. Their community encounters problems when trying to fit organ donation into their existing laws. Saving a human life is revered as a good practice, but it gets sticky when trying to define death and then fitting that into Torah law. So because the Torah is sacred, anything not in there is seen as profane and until rabbis fully understand the implications of organ donation within their law, many Jewish officials will continue to not support donation as part of their moral obligation as a Jew.

Native American religions tend to value the communal life and group support over individual decision-making. It is not that their members frown upon organ donation, but making that decision alone would be detrimental to tribe dynamics. I know that when I made my decision to donate bone marrow, I took into consideration the advice that others gave me (my friends at college supporting me or my aunt and uncle worrying more about my personal health than the amazing opportunity to help someone in a great time of need, for example), but at the end of the day, I personally decided to contribute even though my aunt was wary about the process. Also, Native American's tend to view their community member's remains as sacred material that needs to be respected, honored, and cherished. If a deceased person's heart is still beating in another patient, then it may be hard to fully lie to rest their friend and truly treat the remains as sacred. Therefore, removing parts of people's bodies, even tissue such as blood, becomes a profane act.

Christians are unique in that many values that were once seen as 'capitalist American values' have turned into Christian values due to majority of America being Christian and embodying a capitalist work ethic. There are distinct benefits for being an organ donor, none of which are usually monetary (although the black market is huge into organs). Being seen as an altruistic person improves a person's ego as well as their image in society. I know from personal experience, when everyone starts telling you that you are a hero and you did an amazing selfless thing for someone that I didn't even know, I started to really believe it and buy into it after awhile. It isn't that I didn't believe that I was a great person for doing this for someone, but I still think being called a hero was a bit much for me to handle, personally. However, I was seen as great *individual*, not as being part of a great community that helped me make the decision and thus through the surgery and

recovery process. We can clearly see the difference in decision-making and thought processes.

Personal Bone Marrow Donation Experience within my Social Identities

If I looked at my bone marrow donation experience through the eyes of a Christian, it was my duty to fulfill my "calling" to help save this woman's life. I was blessed with the intelligence and grace to know that I have been blessed and I need to share that with others. I also had to have faith that I would make it through the procedure safely. When I was deciding whether or not I was going to donate, I came to the conclusion that I had something that someone else needed and I was the *only* person who had it. I felt it was my moral obligation to donate because it would be selfish if I did not. I will get my healthy bone marrow back – she never will…who am I to say that she doesn't deserve the right to live? It is hard to say why I came to the conclusion that I did – religion, education, passion for others, etc., but we can say that there is a strong correlation between what a majority individuals decide about an ethical issue (such as being an organ donor), what they decide to do, and with which religion they associate themselves.

Conclusion and emerging problems with Organ Donation

In a recent New York Times article published on Feb. 27th, 2008, Jesse McKinley writes about a surgeon who is being accused of speeding up someone's death in order to harvest his organs. He was pronounced brain dead in the end, but some are arguing that it could be to the excessive amounts of drugs that the surgeon gave him when he was taken off of his ventilator. The article says, "about 18 people a day die in the United States waiting for transplants. That has created a tremendous demand for donor organs" (McKinley 2008). When Mr. Navarro was removed from his ventilator, the doctor gave

him typical medications that help a dying patient with pain. Even though in the end he was brain damaged, the doctor is said to have made him that way because his heart was already compromised and she wanted the organs. "Cardiac-death donations can make some doctors and nurses skittish," McKinley writes. Because a person can technically be kept alive on machines, doctors and nurses like to see a patient brain dead and that way they don't have to confront a definition of mortality that is often in limbo. The idea of when a person is dead, bodily integrity, and a drive to safe someone's life all come together in this story of organ donation and the continued debate over when to harvest.

Through analyzing a couple of articles from New York Times, classical sociological thought, and a scholarly journals, I was able to make connections between the intersection of religion, culture, and organ donation. Each religion has its own reasons for either allowing donation of tissue, putting strict specifications on the donation, or not letting it happen at all. Each religion cited reasons ranging from their community, to their ancient scripture teachings and values, to altruism, and holistic mind, body, and spirit ideals. Organ donation is particularly telling of the values of a culture and religion simply because it gets right to the subject of the bodily integrity and how much a community values wholeness within themselves.

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