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Author(s)	Shimazono, Yosuke
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Cultivating a New Somatic Sense of Self: Filipino Patients' Experience of Kidney Transplantation

*Yosuke Shimazono*¹

¹ Institute of Medical, Pharmaceutical and Health Sciences,
Kanazawa University

I. Introduction

The medical concept of organ replacement is often said to originate from Cartesian dualism and a view of the 'body as machine'. This claim is oversimplified from the medical historical viewpoint. However, the practice of organ transplantation appears to have a cultural kinship with the legacy of Cartesian dualism, which is deeply rooted in the contemporary Western thought.

Although the Cartesian dualism of soul and matter is no longer popular in modern scientific and academic discourses, the concept of mind–body dualism has shown much more resilience. In today's intellectual environment, anything related to the mind tends to be equated with the functioning of the brain. This reductionist view of the mind implicitly assumes a dualistic view of the human being as the 'brain and the rest' (cf. Damasio 1994). The machine remains a privileged model of the body as well, despite the fact that the prototype of the machine has changed since the time of Descartes.

The idea of organ replacement seems naturally to align with the body–machine analogy. If a certain part of a machine is not behaving as expected, we seek to identify which part has broken down or worn out; we then fix the problem by replacing it with its functional equivalent. The characteriza-

tion of organ transplantation as ‘spare-part surgery’ is often endorsed by medical practitioners themselves as well (cf. Longmore 1968). A disembodied view of the mind also suggests that the replacement of human organs—except for the brain, a privileged organ with which the mind’ is exclusively associated with—would not affect the core part of the self (Hacking 2005; Leder 2002).

Questions that arise at this point are how organ transplantees experience their bodily transformation, do they subscribe to the view of organ transplantation as ‘spare-part surgery’, does any alternative vision of organ transplantation arise from their lived experience, and what kind of perceptual and interpretative processes are involved. I shall address these questions in light of the results of my anthropological fieldwork on kidney transplantation in the Philippines.

II. Method

The questions mentioned above are examined here in reference to the ethnographic data obtained through my anthropological fieldwork on kidney transplantation in the Philippines. During the 18-month fieldwork, I conducted intensive interviews with 52 kidney recipients. Transcripts of these interviews were examined, together with other ethnographic data derived from my participant observation of patient’s self-help group and informal regular communication with informants.

III. Result

The data obtained from my research suggests that, insofar as kidney transplantees are concerned, they experience a certain transformation of a sense of self, and this is partly related to (a) a novel somatic sensibility pertaining to the presence of a ‘foreign organ’ inside their bodies and (b) the use of metaphorical imagination to respond to the ‘body’s insistence on meaning’ (Kirmayer 1992). I shall illustrate this through a brief presentation of two case studies.

1. Maria's case

Maria, a widow and a mother of two daughters, had undergone a kidney transplant 17 years ago. She was the eldest of five siblings, and she received a kidney from her youngest brother as her donor. She recalled how she spent the three years following the surgery: 'The first three years, everything you have to be careful. Because I lie down, in this kind of position, left side down, I can feel as if it always pulled down'. She stated several times how she could still feel the presence of a kidney beneath the surgical scar by pressing on it where the skin covered it. However, she said she was now used to the feeling. She stated:

You know, it's like in *a new house*. It is there [she put her two palms on the right side of her lower abdomen]. I think it is already covered by tissue because it is really there. . . . *Can you imagine a baby, covered with, what do you called that? In their mother's womb?* I can imagine. It is just like that.

The interior of the body is envisaged here through metaphorical imagery. In the image of her interior of the body, as the kidney was moved into a new house, it began to be covered by tissue. It thus becomes 'like a baby' enveloped in the womb. The reference to the new 'house' (*bahay*) is based on a conventional metaphor, *bahay-bata*, or 'baby's house', which in Tagalog means a uterus.

2. Patricia's case

Patricia, a former nurse, underwent a kidney transplant, with her younger brother as the donor. Recalling the moment when she woke up for the first time after the operation, Patricia stated, 'I could feel that I have a [new] kidney. Before, you had it at the back. You can now feel that your kidney is here. Something is in front of you!' As she made the first move to get out of the bed, she instinctively put her palms on her belly as, in her words, she felt 'as if the kidney was falling down'. She instinctively tried to hold it up. For about a month, she 'held the kidney up' whenever she walked.

Such an initial bizarre feeling gradually disappeared, but she adopted a practice that has become her everyday habit: talking to the kidney while

placing her palm over the site of the incision. During the interview, she elaborated on the meaning of this practice, saying

He gave it to me without asking anything in return. It is a part of me ... what he has given to me... I have to cherish [it]. [...] *It is just like cherishing a baby. You always talk to him so that, you know, he will grow.* Because, you know, your mind is powerful. What you are thinking and how you are feeling always affect your senses of your body. When you are ... if you feel so dull, if you feel so depressed..., it is a way of making yourself happy that he is a part of me. It is a remembrance between my brother and me. Wherever I go, I take him together. It is a reminder of how much you are loved.

When she made the comment, she could not control her tears; she paused for a while before she continued. It was one of several emotional climaxes in the two-and-a-half-hour interview session.

IV. Discussion

It is well known that some organ transplantees report that their personality traits, character, habits, disposition etc. have been altered after organ transplantation. Transplantees who make this kind of claim are often recipients of the heart, an organ loaded with dense symbolic meanings. Medical practitioners may write off such claims, saying the heart is a mere ‘pump’. Indeed, transplant surgeons, psychiatrists and nurses also provide heart recipients with medical explanations of their bodily conditions based on this model. Nonetheless, some transplantees reportedly believe that transplantation of the heart has led to a ‘change of heart’, so to speak, because the transplanted organ has brought along with it the donor’s personality traits. In this way, heart transplantees construct a view of organ transplantation that is different from a view of it as ‘spare-part surgery’ (cf. Castelnuovo-Tedesco 1973; 1978; Kaba et al. 2005; Mai 1993; Sharp 1995; 2006).

Interestingly, the results of a survey conducted by Bunzel and others show that, while many heart transplantees admit that having lived through the vicissitudes of illness and heart transplantation had a profound impact

on their personal identity and sense of self, it is only a small minority who attribute this to the transfer of the donor's personality traits to them (Bunzel et al. 1992). Most interviewees in my study also did not take this idea of the transfer of personality traits seriously.¹ They neither accepted the 'spare-part surgery' view of transplantation nor responded to the preexisting cultural symbolism; instead, they cultivated a new somatic sense of self by attending to the novel bodily sensations and responding to the 'body's insistence on meaning' by the use of metaphorical imagination.

1. Attention to novel somatic sensations

We 'normally' do not have sensory access to our own kidneys. Lying beneath the body's 'surface', the 'viscera' are 'absent' from the body lived and experienced from within. We are aware of their presence only through our knowledge of the anatomy of the body (Leder 1990). This remains true as well for patients suffering from end-stage kidney disease. They suffer from various bodily discomforts, but diseased kidneys do not present themselves directly to their bodily senses (Kierans 2005).

However, when a 'new' and 'foreign' kidney is transplanted beneath the subcutaneous fat in the lower abdomen, a certain transformation occurs. The anatomical modification of the body, which is insignificant from a biomedical viewpoint, causes a transformation of the lived body. When patients wake up after the surgery, a 'foreign' kidney immediately begins to assert its presence beneath the skin through novel bodily sensations. A 'new' organ beneath the skin is felt to be 'tangible' through the medium of one's own skin. The transplanted kidney has a unique presence in these patients' 'mindful' bodies (cf. Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987).

2. Use of metaphorical imagination

Some kidney recipients, especially those who have received a kidney from a paid kidney donor, expressed a feeling of repugnance towards the new somatic sensations and tended not to pay close attention to them. Yet, other kidney recipients actively attended to these feelings. Some of my interview-

¹. For the issue of body image of kidney transplantees, see (Basch 1973; Lefebvre et al. 1973; Muslin 1971; Muslin 1972).

ees stated that they felt a ‘pulsating movement’ beneath the surgical scar and interpreted it as a sign, indicating that the transplanted kidney was ‘alive’ and properly functioning, or that the transplanted kidney ‘demanded’ that the patients drink water. In responding this way, they metaphorically personified the kidney, weaving somatic sensations with meanings and integrating them into a new somatic sense of self. In the cases of Maria and Patricia, they did so through the metaphor of the ‘kidney as a foetus’. They were not alone in this regard. It is a core metaphor or a key analogy used by kidney transplantees, especially females.

Imagination has a kinship with metaphor and analogy. Metaphors and analogies could be the result of an imaginative interpretative process or could facilitate the process by bridging different semantic domains. They both figure prominently in poems, religious rituals and scientific discoveries. Instead of seeing the body as a machine, and a graft as a spare part, kidney transplantees employ different metaphors and analogies. In Maria’s account, this metaphorical imagery was developed by linking the post-transplant embodiment with a pregnant embodiment and imagining the connective tissues of her body covering a kidney as a sort of ‘womb’. In doing so, she cultivated a new body image, and one in which the sensible presence of the transplanted kidney beneath the skin became an integral part. In the case of Patricia, she enacted this metaphor by talking to the ‘kidney as a foetus’ and, through this bodily ritual performance, reflexively acting on her ‘mindful’ body and cultivating a new somatic sense of self.

V. Conclusion

To summarise, the data I obtained suggests that a considerable number of kidney transplantees did not subscribe to the ‘spare-part surgery’ view of organ transplantation; neither did they passively accept the pre-existing cultural symbolism that gives an alternative meaning to organ transplantation. Instead, they often developed a new orientation to their own bodies, both tangible and in imagery, and cultivated a new somatic sense of self by enmeshing novel somatic experiences with meanings through the use of creative imagination.

This paper only examined a few cases of Filipino kidney recipients. It is

difficult to state how common the use of metaphor is in precise, quantitative terms. However, a similar investigation may be carried out regarding recipients of other organs. Recipients of different organs may have different bodily sensations and different uses of metaphorical imagination. A cross-cultural comparison may reveal various metaphors and divergent manifestations of creative imagination in remaking the body image after organ transplantation. The findings of this paper thus point to the need for a wider investigation into the role of somatic sensibility and imagination in the lives of organ transplantees or patients who experience the effect of the invasive medical intervention to their bodies.

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