
Doing Biographical Work: The ‘Self’ of Immunological Theory and the ‘Self’ of Autoimmune Disease

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Abstract

Session: Immunology and Individuality (Anderson, Pradeu, Tauber, Vivier) While Macfarlane Burnet and others were elaborating on the idea of the immune ‘self’, patients with autoimmune diseases were doing their own ‘biographical work’, tending to the self of chronic illness. Burnet was aware that any theory of antibody production must explain pathologies of immunity such as autoimmune disease. Certainly, clinical immunologists came to see autoimmune disease as the pathology of self-recognition. But through the 1960s and 1970s, the clinical hegemony of the immune self was limited. Patients with autoimmune diseases such as SLE, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, to name just a few, rarely imagined their illness as a form of immunological hyper-reactivity to self. Yet at the same time, they were engaged in a related form of biographical work, incited by the experience of chronic illness. For many, chronic illness found expression in a language of loss-in particular, the loss of self-a language more meaningful, if less elegant conceptually, than the discourse of self and not-self articulated in immunology. While clinical immunologists sought to restore the integrity of the body, to lessen self-reactivity through suppressing immune responses, patients tried through social means to restore a sense of self, to reclaim a self displaced by chronic illness. There was thus a congruence of thought styles between immunologists and sufferers of chronic illness, with both groups favouring a physiological rather than an ontological mode-without apparent intellectual contact. Using Burnet’s archive and selections from patient records and literary studies, I will discuss the pathos of these uncoordinated ‘selves’.

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