Healing through Meaning: Placebo, Meditation and Beyond

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Overview

- Placebo
  - Meaning
- Biophysical Model
- Wider notion of Placebo
- Healing and Meditation
  - Healing from a distance
What’s special about Placebo?

- Dan Moerman
  - Medical anthropologist
- Placebo does not cause the placebo effect
- But the context
  - size and color of the pill
  - information
  - Interaction
  - etc.
- Meaning
  - ‘meaning response’
What is special about meaning?

- Requires consciousness
- Individual, context-dependent
- Makes us human
“The least significant fact about Homo sapiens is that we have evolved. So has everything else that lives. (...) What makes us different is that we are the meaning-seeking, culture-creating animal.“

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks
What is special about meaning?

- Requires consciousness
- Individual, context-dependent
- Makes us human
  - Meaning-seeking creatures

- Does not fit a dyadic cause-effect model
- Does not fit the biophysical model!
Biophysical Model

The causal machine

- analytic
- reductionist
- healing from outside
- passive ‘patient’
- unconscious

Difficult to locate meaning!

Man as Industrial Palace, Fritz Kahn 1926
The problem

Colloca & Benedetti, Nat. Rev. Neurosc. 2005, 6, 545
Placebo points beyond brain function
Every sign matters!
Beyond

- Architecture of hospitals, etc.
- Social environment
- Communication and interaction
- Attitude
- Patients' attitude
- Optimal Healing Environment

- Meditation and Healing
Exclusion of Placebo Benefits!

Efficacy Paradox

Walach, Loef, J Clin Epidemiol, 2015, 68, 1251
Acupuncture in lower back pain

- **N=1162**, % clinically improved
Meditation

• ’Healing procedure‘
• Conscious self-referential process
• Structural way to work with meaning
• Psychological Effects
• Self regulation
• Effects on the brain
Is Meditation Analgesia the same than Placebo Analgesia?

- Meditation analgesia failed
- Hypothesis not communicated to particip.

Esch, T …..Schmidt, S. submitted to PloSOne
Distant Intention Research
Distant Healing for Others

- Parapsychology Research
- Extension of meaning
- Meaning is not individual
- Co-created world
- How far can the mind reach?
- Positive intentions on the physiology of distant others
  - Prayer, wishes, little rituals, distant healing
Distant Intention Experiment

„Receiver“

Electrodermal Activity

EDA

ψ

„Agent“

Activate

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EDA-DMILS

- Started 1977, William Braud
- Many paradigms
- DMILS: Direct mental interaction in living systems
- EDA as dependent variable
- ‘Activate’ ‘Calm’ epochs, rest
- 10-30 epochs, 20-60 seconds
- Randomized, balanced
- Approx. 40 studies
EDA-DMILS Meta-Analysis

- All EDA-DMILS
- Unpublished studies
- Extensive quality rating
- Exclusion of four studies
- Weighted for quality and size
- $K=36$, $N=1015$
- Mean effect size $d=0.11$ ($p=.001$)

Schmidt et al. 2004, Brit J Psychol, 95, 235
Remote Staring
Remote Staring

• 15 studies, 379 sessions
• Validates first meta-analysis?
• Homogeneity (p = .60), no unexplained variance
• Weighted for study size
• mean effect size $d = 0.13$ ($p = .01$)

Schmidt et al. 2004, Brit J Psychol, 95, 235
Attention Focusing Facilitation

„Receiver“

Electrodermal Activity

„Agent“

Focus

Activating EDA Button

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Meta-Analysis

• Until 2010 11 studies, 576 sessions
• Homogeneity (p = .11), little unexplained variance
• Weighted for study size
• mean effect size $d = 0.11$ (p = .009)

Schmidt (2012), JACM, 18, 529-533
Summary

k=62 studies, N=1970 sessions

Remote Staring: $d=0.13$, $p=.01$

EDA-DMILS: $d=0.11$, $p=.001$

Attention Focusing Facilitation: $d=0.11$, $p=.01$
Questionable Research Practices

- Replication Problem in Parapsychology
- Replication Problem in Psychology
  - 36% Replication Rate (Science 2015, 349, aa4716)
- QRPs
  - Selection of variables
  - Running more participants
  - Dealing with outliers, etc.
- Higher standards in parapsychology
- Simulation needed
  - Effects might be partially due to QRP
Thank you very much for your attention!
Biosemiotic Model

- Mind-body problem
- Peirce, Uexküll,
- tripartite semiotic relationship
Change of Perspective

Biophysical Framework
- placebo
- consciousness

Biosemiotic Framework
- causal effects
Meta-Analysis Meditation

- Change in brain structure, $k=21$ studies
- Short and longterm

Fox et al. Neurosc Behav Rev 2014, 43, 48