

Contemplating...the Obvious: What you Focus On, you Amplify

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Contemplating...the Obvious: What you Focus On, you Amplify

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness has been transformed over recent years from a spiritual practice to a method of clinical intervention. This is a new evolutionary step in applying mindfulness in ways that move it much, much closer to the related domain of hypnosis. Both approaches now share a goal-oriented, purposeful clinical pragmatism. This contribution is an “op-ed” piece regarding the author’s view of the distant relationship between mindfulness and hypnosis practitioners. Understanding of the similar and differential aspects of mindfulness and hypnosis can be enhanced by recognizing that “what is focused upon is amplified.” Similarities between hypnosis and mindfulness should be more widely recognized. Differences between hypnosis and mindfulness exist but not because of innately different structures. Rather, differences exist because of what each general approach is likely to focus upon in regard to goals and content.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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When I wrote what I believe is the first book on the combined subjects of mindfulness and hypnosis, called *Mindfulness and Hypnosis: The Power of Suggestion to Transform Experience* (2011a), I did so after considerable study of the methods of mindfulness and after interviewing the acclaimed leaders of the mindfulness movement about their understandings of the nature of their methods. I was particularly curious about their views of the guided meditations they routinely conducted, which, to me, looked very much like the clinical hypnosis sessions I have spent my professional lifetime studying.

To my unhappy surprise, I experienced first-hand the judgmental aspects of their oft-stated nonjudgmental philosophies; many of the interviewees reacted with various degrees of indignation, if not downright revulsion, as if to say, “Don’t get that icky hypnosis all over my nice mindfulness!” Mindfulness practice, as each expert was quick to tell me, is rooted in the ancient wisdom traditions of the East, dedicated to developing self-understanding, serene acceptance of life’s trials, and spiritual growth. Said to be free of religious dogma or orthodoxy, presumably it imposes nothing but simply elicits an inner “awakening” of people’s “true selves” and helps them “cultivate compassion,” “awaken from the trance of unworthiness,” and, of course, “attain enlightenment.”

Hypnosis, by contrast, was all too frequently considered an unrelated phenomenon, not much more than a crass theatrical stunt – an occasion for a power-hungry hypnotist to exert mind control over a seemingly passive subject. In this terribly distorted view, hypnotists impose their will on easily led people, as epitomized in a cheesy Las Vegas stage show where the slick, manipulative hypnotist makes a row of volunteers believe and

act as if they were playing musical instruments or pantomime over-the-top lascivious behavior. Like professionals in so many other areas, mindfulness experts simply dismissed hypnosis as irrelevant at least and an obstacle to the higher aspirations of true self-awareness at most. If mindfulness is symbolized by the Buddha, his soft gaze turned down in serene contemplation, hypnosis is too often represented by Svengali, his fierce eyes fixed on his prey (Yapko, 2011b). Every clinician who practices hypnosis faces this type of bias against hypnosis rooted in misconception, spending inordinate amounts of time trying to explain what hypnosis is and is not. It is frustratingly apparent how far we still have to go to establish the merits and relevance of hypnosis in clinical contexts in the awareness of our professional colleagues.

TRANSITIONING FROM SPIRITUAL TO CLINICAL

Mindfulness has been transformed over recent years from a spiritual practice to a method of clinical intervention. This is a new evolutionary step in applying mindfulness in ways that move it much, much closer to the related domain of hypnosis. Both approaches now share a goal-oriented, purposeful clinical pragmatism. Some mindfulness practitioners seem to miss that point, however, when they assert that "mindfulness is attention without intention." That definition, paradoxically, states that a goal of such practice is to have no goal. In contrast, hypnosis may best be thought of as paying attention with intention. But the key role of attention and how attention is utilized is an inescapable common denominator of both approaches. Does this huge shift in intent and method lead mindfulness practitioners to study hypnosis and how its use incorporates the utilization of attention? Do mindfulness practitioners study the role of language and suggestion in their guided meditations or cite hypnosis research in their work or see a value in clinical hypnosis as an overlapping type of contemplative practice? Have hypnosis experts been invited to present at mindfulness conferences?

In the years since *Mindfulness and Hypnosis* came out, many articles comparing hypnosis to mindfulness have been published, and these typically speak to the clinical benefits of utilizing these approaches in some integrative style. In fact, an entire issue of the *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* (July 2018) was devoted to the topic of hypnosis and mindfulness, preceding this special issue of the *IJCEH* on contemplative practices. Books on the topic have also been published, including one by *IJCEH* Editor Gary Elkins and coauthor Nicholas Olendzki called *Mindful Hypnotherapy: The Basics for Clinical Practice* (2019). Another book was published called *Hypnosis & Meditation: Toward an Integrative Science of Conscious Planes*, edited by Raz and Lifshitz (2016). Hypnosis experts have clearly been moved to study mindfulness and acknowledge its multidimensional benefits and strong overlaps with hypnosis.

UNREQUITED LOVE AND SELF-DECEPTION

The fact that the hypnosis community has so readily embraced mindfulness and made a point of building bridges to the mindfulness community by writing serious books and articles on the subject as well as inviting mindfulness experts to speak at national hypnosis conferences is, I believe, a reflection of the hypnosis community's deep appreciation of the merits of many different but related approaches involving the use of focusing methods as

a therapeutic common denominator. However, the mindfulness community has done considerably less to acknowledge the merits of hypnosis. Hypnosis currently appears to be enduring an unrequited love.

More than one expert I interviewed for my book said, "I don't see how you can write a book about hypnosis and mindfulness. Hypnosis relies entirely on suggestion but, in mindfulness, we don't use suggestion." My response was one of incredulity:

Really? You believe you can conduct guided mindfulness meditations and can encourage people to close their eyes but you're not suggesting anything? You can direct people to focus on their breathing but assert that you're not suggesting anything? You can instruct people to be non-judgmental and just stay in a present moment awareness but believe you're not suggesting anything? You can encourage people to focus on developing feelings of compassion or loving-kindness towards themselves and others but not acknowledge you're directly suggesting an induction of affect?

Unfortunately, it seems that some members of the hypnosis community have been persuaded by and even adopted some of the same self-deceptive perspectives about the differences between hypnosis and mindfulness as some mindfulness practitioners. For example, contributors to the Raz and Lifshitz book (2016) wrote, "Whereas mindfulness meditation aims to develop accurate meta-awareness, the hypnotic experience results from a lack of awareness of intentions; hypnosis is effectively a form of self-deception" (Dienes et al., 2016, p.107). Really? Hypnosis results from a lack of awareness of intentions? How does one enter into a cooperative therapeutic relationship with a clinician and be oblivious to the intentions of the therapy or any of the hypnosis sessions conducted within that relationship? On the contrary, the fact that hypnosis is an unapologetically goal-oriented approach makes the intentions both clear and defined cooperatively. The old misconception that hypnosis is something you do to someone rather than with someone may be the reason for this mischaracterization of the relationship between hypnosis and awareness of intention.

In another example, contributors to the special hypnosis and mindfulness issue of the AJCH (July 2018) wrote,

Thus, a key difference between mindfulness-based interventions and hypnosis has to do with the targeted therapeutic process; with the practice of mindfulness the target is a shift in one's relationship to experience, while hypnosis targets a shift in the experience itself" (Grover, Jensen, Patterson, Gertz, & Day, 2018, p. 6).

These writers miss what I consider an obvious point and one of the first principles you learn when you begin a study of hypnosis: What you focus on, you amplify. The differences between hypnosis and mindfulness most certainly exist but not because of innately different structures. On the contrary, the differences exist because of what each approach is likely to focus upon in terms of a session's goals and content.

To suggest that hypnosis targets a shift in the experience itself but not the relationship to the experience (as mindfulness is purported to do) is patently absurd. If you introduce changes in the client's experience in some way, are you not inevitably also redefining his or her relationship to that experience in the process? In clinical practice, for example, when a therapist offers suggestions of pain relief, is the client responding to such suggestions with the experience of pain relief not then redefining the relationship to his or her body and the pain there? Is the person not redefining his or her relationship to previous

perceptions regarding the controllability of the pain experience? Is the person not redefining his or her perceptions of self-identity expansively when discovering he or she is capable of so much more self-regulation than was previously assumed? The experience is changing, but so is the relationship to the experience.

Likewise, to frame hypnosis as “a form of self-deception” while meditation is about “self-awareness” and “truth” is truly a frightening perspective to me. It presupposes there is some “truth” to discover through meditation that hypnosis ostensibly prevents you from discovering. Again, how you structure a session, whether of hypnosis or guided meditation, will exert an inescapable influence on what the client experiences. Self-awareness is itself a deceptive goal given the growing evidence in the world of cognitive neuroscience that our capacity for self-awareness is limited at the most basic level by our neurobiological makeup. Stated bluntly, thinking you are self-aware doesn’t make it so. Thinking you know “the truth” doesn’t mean you actually do. While hypnosis may lead people to adopt suggested perceptions that might serve to help them feel better, a meditation practice does the exact same thing but through a different pathway. People simply adopt another subjective “truth,” one that perhaps feels better but may not have much more to do with objective “reality” than the previously held “truth.”

DIFFERENCES IN CONTENT, MIND, AND BRAIN

Of course, there are process and content differences between meditation and hypnosis that are worth exploring, some of which are discussed elsewhere in this special issue, and I actively encourage those explorations to continue. But I would argue that instead of attributing these to innate differences between the two approaches, I believe they would be better understood as differences arising from their substantially different focal points. Practitioners of hypnosis will likely stimulate different qualities of cognition, affect, and physiology than would practitioners of guided meditations. Likewise, hypnosis sessions will predictably involve and affect different parts of the brain than would guided mindfulness meditations, as current neuroscience has repeatedly shown us. Stated differently, clinical applications of hypnosis will typically target different experiential and perceptual processes than will approaches to mindfulness, virtually assuring different corresponding neurological and experiential consequences. Hypnosis practitioners are typically aiming for symptom reduction, possibly but not necessarily greater self-awareness or increased awareness of and connection to the moment-to-moment experience. But, if hypnosis were applied to goals similar to those of meditation (sidestepping the meditation self-deception of merely “paying attention without intention” when individuals most definitely have underlying goals), the brain signatures and therapeutic responses would necessarily overlap. Likewise, when practitioners provide guided mindfulness meditations that have a therapeutic goal in mind, the overlaps to hypnosis will be far more evident.

Jean Holroyd, then a professor at UCLA, wrote the following in 2003 (Holyrod, 2003):

When meditation involves activities other than just concentration, EEG patterns change over the relevant cortical sites, depending on the meditation activity. In a direct parallel, when hypnosis involves suggestions, the appropriate sensory and motor areas of the brain may be activated even more than in the non-hypnotic condition. (2003, p. 117).

The neuroscientific literature has increased exponentially since she wrote those revealing words and reaffirms the salient point: What you focus upon you amplify, and what you amplify will have measurable effects on which parts of the brain become active and which

do not. Hypnosis, mindfulness meditation, and every other contemplative and experiential practice will show differing effects simply based on what they strive to amplify – and what they prime – in the person absorbed in the experience.

Encouraging people to focus, either narrowly or broadly, internally or externally, concretely or abstractly, as a means of becoming more aware, open, and accepting is not unique to either hypnosis or mindfulness, however. Suggestion is inherent across all treatments. Knowing this helps us focus more on the essence of something rather than its packaging and advertising. Mindfulness is a wonderful vehicle for connecting people to their resources and better selves. So is hypnosis. I am hopeful that with the widespread and still growing enthusiasm for mindfulness there will also come a greater appreciation for the hypnotic components of these experiences that have been so well described in the literature (Yapko, 2019).

Deep questions remain. How do we create the conditions that encourage knowing and growing the best parts of ourselves and others? How can we make the merits of mindfulness, hypnosis, and other such opportunities for experiential learning more understandable, usable, and available to the clients we serve? How can we selflessly share the knowledge that makes the whole greater than the sum of the parts?

I think Buddha's answer to such questions is perfect: "Mind comes first. Before deed and words comes thought or intention."

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Kontemplation.... Das Offensichtliche : Worauf man sich fokussiert, das verstrt man

MICHAEL D. YAPKO

Abstract : Achtsamkeitspraxis hat sich über die vergangenen Jahre hinweg von einer spirituellen Praxis hin zu einer Methode klinischer Intervention gewandelt. Dieses ist ein neuer Entwicklungsschritt in der Anwendung von Achtsamkeit in einer Art und Weise, die sie der verwandten Domäne der Hypnose viel, viel näherbringt. Beide Ansätze teilen nun einen zielorientierten, zielgerichteten klinischen Pragmatismus. Dieser Beitrag ist eine der Redaktionsseite entgegengesetzte Darstellung in Bezug auf die Sichtweise des Autors hinsichtlich der entfernten Verbindung zwischen Achtsamkeits- und Hypnose-Praktizierenden. Das Verständnis für die ähnlichen und unterschiedlichen Aspekte von Achtsamkeitspraxis und Hypnose kann dadurch verstrt werden, daß man versteht, daß „dasjenige verstrt wird, auf das man sich fokussiert“. Ähnlichkeiten zwischen Hypnose und Achtsamkeitspraxis sollten viel mehr anerkannt werden. Unterschiede zwischen Hypnose und Achtsamkeitspraxis bestehen aber nicht aufgrund immanenter unterschiedlicher Strukturen. Vielmehr existieren Unterschiede aufgrund dessen, worauf sich die einzelnen Ansätze in Bezug auf Ziele und Inhalt eher konzentrieren.

STEPHANIE RIEGEL, M.D.

Contempler... l'évidence : ce qui est ciblé est amplifié

MICHAEL D. YAPKO

Résumé : La pleine conscience a évolué au cours des dernières années, passant d'une pratique spirituelle à une méthode d'intervention clinique. Il s'agit d'une nouvelle étape évolutive dans l'application de la pleine conscience d'une manière qui la place beaucoup, beaucoup plus proche du domaine connexe de l'hypnose. Ces deux approches partagent maintenant un pragmatisme clinique concret, axé sur les objectifs. Le présent article se veut le point de vue de l'auteur sur la relation distante entre les praticiens de la pleine conscience et ceux de l'hypnose. On peut améliorer la compréhension des similarités et différences entre la pleine conscience et l'hypnose en reconnaissant que « ce qui est ciblé est amplifié ». Les similitudes entre l'hypnose et la pleine conscience gagneraient à être reconnues sur une plus grande échelle. Il existe des différences entre l'hypnose et la pleine conscience, mais celles-ci ne se trouvent pas dans leur structure innée, mais plutôt dans l'axe prioritaire de chaque approche générale relativement à leurs objectifs et à leur contenu.

JOHANNE RAYNAULT C. Tr. (STIBC)

Contemplando... lo obvio: Amplificamos aquello en lo que nos enfocamos.

MICHAEL D. YAPKO

Resumen: El mindfulness (o atención plena) se ha transformado de una práctica espiritual, a un método de intervención clínica. Esto ha sido un nuevo paso evolutivo al aplicar el mindfulness de manera que se acerca mucho al dominio de la hipnosis. Ambas aproximaciones ahora comparten un pragmatismo clínico propulsivo

enfocado a objetivos. Esta contribución es una “página de opinión” donde el autor expresa su visión sobre la relación distante entre los practicantes del mindfulness y de la hipnosis. El entendimiento de los aspectos similares y diferentes del mindfulness y de la hipnosis puede aumentarse al reconocer que “lo que se enfoca se amplifica.” Las similitudes entre la hipnosis y el mindfulness deben ser más ampliamente reconocidas. Las diferencias entre la hipnosis y el mindfulness existen, pero no por estructuras innatas diferentes, más bien las diferencias existen por los objetivos y contenidos en los que se enfoca, de manera general, cada aproximación.

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