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### Contemplating... the Obvious: What You Focus On, You Amplify

I'm grateful to Editor Gary Elkins for inviting me to participate in this special issue of the *IJCEH* regarding contemplative practices. This contribution is essentially an "op-ed" piece regarding my subjective view of the relationship between mindfulness and hypnosis practitioners.

#### **Mindfulness Good, Hypnosis Bad?**

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 experienced first-hand the judgmental aspects of their oft-stated non-judgmental 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 they are quick to tell with pride, 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 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.

### **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. Does this huge

shift in intent and method lead mindfulness practitioners to study hypnosis? Do they cite hypnosis research in their work or see a value in clinical hypnosis as a shared 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 co-author Nicholas Olendzki called *Mindful Hypnotherapy: The Basics for Clinical Practice* (2019). Another book was published called *Hypnosis & Meditation: Towards an Integrative Science of Conscious Planes*, edited by Amir Raz and Michael Lifshitz (2016). Hypnosis experts have clearly been moved to study mindfulness and acknowledge its multi-dimensional 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 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, Lush, Semmens-Wheeler et al., 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 et al., 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? 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 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 simply 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 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 aiming for symptom reduction, typically, not greater self-awareness or 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:

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. (p. 117).

The neuroscientific literature has increased exponentially since she wrote that revealing comment 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 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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