

Mind Body Regulation: Lessons From the Field and Laboratory

Commentary. Unpacking the Placebo Response: Insights from Ethnographic Studies of Healing

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This article clearly and masterfully defines “placebo”, integrates theory and experimental findings related to its significance, gives special emphasis to cultural rituals and healing practices, or “Ethnographic Healing” (EH), and critiques contemporary suggestions regarding direct use of placebos in medical practice. The article’s summary and analysis of EH draws on and integrates diverse and up to date information and demonstrates why and how “placebo phenomena” (PP) as understood scientifically and in the laboratory are characteristic of EH as played out in field settings. The article opens the door for a broader interpretation of the set of mechanisms and processes that are responsible for PP and EH, namely mind body regulation (MBR).

It is important to recognize that whatever MBR is, it is responsible for positive effects (its placebo and ethnographic healing) as well as negative ones. The loose and controversial term “psychosomatic” exemplifies how MBR can adversely affect health status. The literature involving effects of social and psychological stress on health amply document this point. In other words, whatever the so-called “placebo effect” is it may at times have negative effects.

MBR has hard wired and machine like features and also is changeable, accommodative, and flexible. A template or structure of organized complexity that continues to persevere and do its job despite myriad of homeostatic perturbations and potential

pathological obstacles helps explain why and how it is important to emphasize MBR as foundation or structure for diverse mechanisms, processes, and responses that the article so well describes as involving PP and EH. That MBR enables and shapes (and in this sense constitutes) a *robust adaptive response pattern or program which is also plastic* seems an appropriate way to capture its character (Bateson & Gluckman, 2011). Thinking of MBR and its relevance in this way places it within the framework of general biology of sickness and healing and facilitates examining it in complementary ways (Fabrega, 1975).

It may be useful to examine MBR from an evolutionary perspective, namely, as an adaptive response pattern of *Homo sapiens*. Viewing it this way, points to a rich terrain of how MBR played out in different medical ecological worlds where infections and animal diseases of *Homo sapiens* predominated compared to the common diseases that are observed in modern clinics, often denominated as “diseases of civilization”. As generally construed, EH involves phenomena taking place in indigenous, non modern settings and this would pertain especially to those of the ancestral past of *Homo sapiens* wherein differing medical ecologies and medical epidemiologies prevailed. One can thus suggest that PP, EH, and MBR were exemplified and played out differently in differing human biological and medical environments (Fabrega, 1976a, 1976b, and 2011). In a historical and cultural sense, it would be interesting to

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examine what EH meant to people at different times in history and from different cultures. The significance of words and actions in different times in different cultures may have widely differing connotations.

This article expertly discusses a variety of mechanisms, processes and functions that are important in understanding placebo effects and leaves a door open for further thought about the nature of MBR.

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