

Retro Review Classic

Review by **Jennifer Maidman**

Understanding the Placebo Effect in Complementary Medicine

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How often do we hear in the mainstream media that this or that medicine or therapy has been found to be '*no better than a placebo*'? The implication often seems to be that the treatment in question should be considered effectively worthless. Use of the word 'placebo' in this context has become ubiquitous, yet the diverse and intriguing effects to which the term refers remain poorly understood and relatively under researched. This is a pity since, as this outstanding collection of essays demonstrates, placebo effects (sometimes called 'non specific effects') can not only greatly enhance physical and psychological wellbeing, they can also teach us a great deal about the relational and cultural context of healing encounters in general. The placebo effect seems to have become somewhat associated in public consciousness with charlatanism and quack medicine. Popular science writers such as Ben Goldacre (whose book *Bad Pharma* is reviewed elsewhere in this issue) do seem to implicitly reinforce this association, perhaps unintentionally. Homeopathy for instance has been attacked as 'unscientific' and 'no better than a placebo'. It's right (in my view) to point out that placebo based treatments such as homeopathy are not in any sense equivalent to conventional medicine; pseudo science deserves to be exposed and challenged strongly as it poses real dangers. There are also ethical considerations around the deliberate and knowing use of placebos. But having read this book I think there is a danger that mainstream science writers may sometimes miss the point and be in effect throwing the self-healing placebo effect 'baby' out with the pseudo-scientific 'bathwater'.

This book, a compilation of essays by a range of authors from varied disciplines, has bold ambitions, and paints a broad and fascinating picture of a phenomenon deeply embedded in a multi-dimensional matrix of relational, cultural, semantic

and ontological factors. The book is divided into four sections, including an Epilogue on 'Psychoneuroimmunology' (a new word to me!) The contents give an idea of the rich diversity of perspectives on offer:

Section 1: Theory

1. Placebos and nocebos: the cultural construction of belief
Cecil G. Helman
2. Towards a scientific understanding of placebo effects
Edzard Ernst
3. A critical reanalysis of the concept, magnitude and existence of placebo effects
Gunver S. Kienle and Helmut Kiene
4. Behavioural conditioning of the immune system
Angela Clow

Section 2: Practice

5. How can we optimize non-specific effects?
James Hawkins
6. Some reflections on creating therapeutic conditions
David Reilly
7. Psychoanalysis, complementary medicine and the placebo
Robert Withers
8. Intersubjectivity and the therapeutic relationship
Janet Richardson
9. Placebo responses in bodywork
Phil Latey
10. Healing and therapeutic touch: is it all in the mind?
Stephen G. Wright and Jean Sayre-Adams

Section 3: Research

11. Non-specific factors in randomized clinical trials: some methodological considerations
Anton J. M. De Craen, Angela J.E.M. Lampe-Schoenmaeckers and Jos Kleijnen
12. The placebo effect and a participatory world view
John Heron

Epilogue

13. Psychoneuroimmunology: the mind brain connection
Peter Fenwick

Reading this book both excited and frustrated me – excitement that an exploration of the processes underpinning placebo effects represent a genuinely new frontier for science, medicine and the human

potential movement – yet frustration that populist science sometimes seems to stand in the way of greater understanding, stuck as it frequently is in a rather positivistic, twentieth century mindset. Often it seems there is an implicit assumption that any improvement in a particular condition or psychological state which can't be unambiguously measured and abstracted from the available data can be set aside as an irritating anomaly.

There is some evidence of a paradigm shift on the ground. In a recent survey for instance (Howick et al., 2013), 97 per cent of British GPs reported having at some time knowingly prescribed a placebo, though the fact that this was reported by some media outlets as an '*admission*' by doctors speaks volumes as to the prevailing cultural attitude. Even though there is more holistic thinking around, it does appear that the term 'placebo' has become somewhat synonymous in public discourse with the idea of something sham or counterfeit. Thus for a doctor to prescribe a placebo is still seen as tantamount to medical subterfuge. Yet, as the research discussed in this book clearly shows, placebo treatments can and do work well, on occasions even better than 'the real thing'. What's more, if they are administered by a person in a white coat with a stethoscope, this sometimes does wonders for their efficacy!

The whiff of disreputability that the placebo effect has acquired, and which this book challenges strongly, is unfortunate and generally undeserved. Not only can such effects be highly beneficial, they are no less than demonstrations of our sometimes miraculous potential for self-healing, a capacity which has been the bedrock of all forms of medicine and therapy through the ages, and without which any curative practice, physical, psychological or spiritual would be futile. Humanistic thinkers have talked in terms of an innate self healing drive – Carl Rogers' 'Actualising Tendency' is a well known example – and the placebo effect could perhaps be conceptualised in a similar way though, if anything, more tangible and empirically verifiable. After all, even the most aggressive interventions of mainstream medicine depend to a considerable extent on the body's ability to regenerate and restore itself. 'Non specific effects' are in reality so taken-for-granted and ever-present, that we only notice them if they fail to appear.

While reading the chapter on '*Placebos and nocebos: the cultural construction of belief*', I was struck by the extent to which the prevailing cultural climate around a particular approach (CBT springs to mind as a topical example) is sure to play a key role in generating self

fulfilling expectations of a favourable outcome before the client and the practitioner even meet. This has profound implications for the way specific approaches are depicted and discussed within the culture at large. It has of course long been understood in the humanistic field that the *relationship* is the principal factor upon which therapeutic outcomes depend, far more important than the particularly modality to which a practitioner subscribes (see for instance Lambert and Barley, 2001), and the book has plenty to say about the relational context in which placebo effects occur.

There are no sub-standard chapters in this book but Reilly, Withers and Heron are particular good on some of the ways in which non-specific effects are fundamental and intrinsic to counselling, psychotherapy and other similar approaches. This is in many ways a courageous book which dares at times to step boldly into uncharted territory. It deserves to be read by anybody concerned with healing in the broadest sense, yet I wonder how many therapists will actually read it, given the current vogue for 'evidence based', instrumental interventions? Certainly it had passed me by until recently and I'm grateful to my co-editor Richard House for bringing it to my attention. I've now ordered my own copy! In my view it would be worth buying for John Heron's essay alone, but many of the other authors also bring unique insights and perspectives by virtue of having an unusual cross disciplinary approach. David Reilly for instance is a physician, homeopath and hypnotherapist, Robert Withers a Jungian analyst, acupuncturist and homeopath. The final chapter by neuro-psychiatrist Peter Fenwick is a tour-de-force of cutting edge transpersonal neuroscience and psycho-social thinking.

Finally, I hope humanistic practitioners are not put off by the reference to 'medicine' in the book's title – it's something of a misnomer as the overall approach is admirably holistic and there isn't a single page which doesn't contain something of interest for the reflective humanistic practitioner. There is far more in this rich and rewarding volume than I can do justice to in a short review. Just buy the book – you won't regret it! **5**

References

- Howick, J., Bishop, F.L., Heneghan, C., Wolstenholme, J., Stevens, S. et al. (2013) *Placebo Use in the United Kingdom: Results from a National Survey of Primary Care Practitioners* (<http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0058247>; retrieved 9/5/13)
- Lambert, M.J. and Barley, D.E. (2001) *Research summary on the therapeutic relationship and psychotherapy outcome*, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 38 (4): 357–61