



Anne Harrington

The Cure Within – A History of Mind-Body Medicine

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Today, unconventional health and healing approaches are increasingly of interest for modern medicine and some become adopted by mainstream academic institutions. About 40 major American universities, including Harvard, Yale, Stanford and UCLA, have formed the “Consortium of Academic Health Centers for Integrative Medicine”. A consistent labeling of the vast array of traditional, alternative, complementary or holistic approaches is a difficult matter. Anne Harrington, Chair of the Department of the History of Science at Harvard University, has decided to use the rather neutral label “Mind-Body Medicine” in her latest book “The Cure Within”.

“The Cure Within” is not an assessment of the scientific validity of the various forms of “Mind-Body Medicine”. Rather, Anne Harrington focuses on the mix of popular and scientific concepts which generated lasting “cultural narratives” of health and healing in the US over the last century. She covers a wide variety of different fields, ranging from religious movements, suggestive therapies and psychosomatic medicine to empirical research on stress, social epidemiology and meditation research. One of Harrington’s key observations is that the different currents of “Mind-Body Medicine” influence and reinforce each other to form common narratives. The main narratives she identifies are “*the power of suggestion*”, “*the body that speaks*”, “*the power of positive thinking*”, “*broken by modern life*”, “*healing ties*” and “*eastward journeys*”. All reflect the search for the meanings of illnesses, which are often neglected in the quest of scientific medicine to conquer diseases.

The narratives which Harrington investigates reflect the experience of those who are suffering from health problems. Their search for personal empowerment, self-healing potentials, social support and mutual aid is critical. The individual quests for personal cure and collective changes in social ties are complimentary ingredients of these narratives. People tell each other stories about their search for healing, their experiences in the process and new scientific hopes for recovery they came across in the media. In Harrington’s words, “*Good stories are not just talk. Many of the best ones are also scripts, or guides to action: things that provide us with a store of specific, if flexible, social roles, cues, and reference points that tell us how to behave and even – sometimes – how to feel (what to experience) in different situations*”.

Beyond the analysis of common narratives, “The Cure Within” is also an account of the emergence of novel approaches and the popularization of fringe stories by charismatic leaders. A common pattern following the emergence of new “Mind-Body Medicine” movements is the search for

“scientific explanations” to gain more approval of the public and the established medical community. As members of the medical and scientific community become interested in increasingly popular ideas, they try to rationalize, demystify and evaluate potential benefits of these unusual approaches for health care. Once new approaches win the approval of the established community, these novel approaches become part of the mainstream “medical tool-kit”. Even if more critical studies in the future may disprove some earlier optimistic assessments, the popular narratives have managed to implant themselves in the public discourse. They constitute an “alchemy of hope and attitudes” which inspires new approaches in health care, healthy lifestyles, healthy products and, not to forget, “healthy” business approaches. In Anne Harrington’s words, the health narratives she identifies “*seem here to stay*”, despite the pace of change in medical science and health care politics.

For more than three decades, I have explored and practiced both scientific medicine and complementary approaches, in my work as a medical doctor, psychotherapist and a consultant in international health policy at WHO. Having closely followed the many ups and downs of the various forms of “Mind-Body Medicine” in the U.S. and in Europe, I compliment professor Harrington for her achievement. “The Cure Within” is not only a fascinating account of the history of “Mind-Body Medicine” but also an excellent critical analysis of its influence and main narratives. By presenting her analytically rigorous work in a compelling narrative, she absorbs the reader and makes us contemplate our own hopes, prejudices and illusions which we have to cope with.

It may have further strengthened her excellent work if she had covered some of the more recent charismatic personalities such as Milton Erickson, Andrew Weil, Jane Fonda or John Travis, who have influenced and inspired narratives like “self-hypnosis”, “self-healing”, “fitness” or “wellness”. Harrington’s view seems a little too East Coast bound and probably undervalues some important West Coast impulses for “Mind-Body Medicine”, like the Esalen-Institute, the New Age Movement and or Humanistic Psychology. A mentioning of major international policy initiatives, such as WHO’s “New Public Health” strategy formulated in the 1986 “Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion” would have added an important policy dimension, which builds intersectorial responsibility for health policy. By hinting at the latest narrative of “the power of the brain” and the extensive media attention to the results of recent brain imaging technologies, she could have provided a glimpse into the future of “Mind-Body Medicine” narratives.

Regardless, “The Cure Within” is an excellent work and there are limits to what can be realistically covered in a single book. It deserves the attention of all of those whose goal it is to reduce the detrimental side of the ongoing struggles between the different “cultures of medicine” and better focus on the common narrative of “Mind-Body

Medicine” and traditional medicine: “improving human health by using all available proven care strategies, empower self-healing potentials and mutual social support.”

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