Major universities 'At One' with Junk Science

By Ruth Kava — February 9, 2018

Major universities (think Harvard, Columbia, Duke, and the University of California), have hopped on the "alternative medicine" bandwagon, establishing centers and programs to supposedly evaluate treatments not based on Western medicine. Not all of the work is done at these institutions — their proponents collaborate at other centers — for example the Chopra Foundation, based at a resort in California. There, researchers from UC San Diego, Duke University, and Harvard collaborated in a study of the effects of "a comprehensive mind-body program on sense of nondual (1) awareness and spiritual awakening," and published it in The Journal Of Alternative And Complementary Medicine (where else?). That program is based on the ancient Indian mind-body health system, Ayurveda.

The current report describes a study in which 49 adults (30-80 years old) were randomly assigned to spend 6 days at the resort as a vacation. An equal number were randomly assigned to participate in the center's "Perfect Health" program. In addition, 23 more people also experienced the PH program (non-random assignment). That program involves daily practices and lectures, group meditation, yoga, breathing exercises and emotional expression.

The point of the program was to get participants to move beyond the "egoic structure of the mind-body and its associated social roles to recognition of self as transcending such limitations...". How well they did that was assessed by an instrument called the Nondual Embodiment Thematic Inventory or NETI. NETI is a questionnaire consisting of 20 questions, with instructions to "indicate how often the following occur for you: for example

"An inner contentment that is not contingent or dependent upon circumstances,"
objects, or the actions of other people. Choose one of the following—

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Sometimes
4. Most of the time
5. All of the time.”

Participants completed the questionnaire before and after completion of the PH program, and 1 month post-program, and at the same time points for controls' 6 days at the resort. Then the differences between the ‘before and after’ answers were computed and compared between PH participants and controls. NETI scores increased for both groups — more in the PH participants, and this was interpreted by the authors to mean that they showed "a significant increase in spirituality".

However, there were issues with the study. First, only 31 percent of the PH participants completed the whole study, and only 46 percent of the controls did so — rather a high rate of drop outs. Second, the groups weren't completely randomized, and the personnel who administered the programs weren't blinded to the assignments. Finally, one can reasonably assume that people who come to the center for this program pay for access to it — so why wasn't this study done to show supposed efficacy before it was made available?

And importantly, why are these "institutions of higher learning" supporting people who participate in these studies? Yes, we don't think such "alternative health care" is worth much, as anyone who has followed ACSH in the past can read on our site — [here][3], for example. We have nothing against people choosing to meditate, or follow an ancient Indian tradition. But professionals from some of our leading universities should not substitute "alternative research" for objectivity and basic principles of statistical analysis.

1) A sense of nondual awareness relates to a person's self perception. Rather than being identified with the mind-body ego, a person who has a nondual awareness would identify with a less personal awareness — they would transcend the former.

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