

THOUGHTS ABOUT ADVANCING FOCUSING RELATED TO THE BROADER SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents another opportunity to promote Focusing by indicating several strategies which could place Focusing more solidly on the map of traditional scientific inquiry and scientific endeavor. There are different ways to advance Focusing and ways to develop research on Focusing. This paper has practical suggestions related to Focusing and science. As Focusing is seen over time as building in legitimacy as a ‘paradigm’ worthy of scientific attention, there is a substantial increase in resources which can be directed toward research on Focusing and Focusing-related practice.

HOW RELIABLE AND VALID ARE THE MEASURES AND MEASURED RELATIONSHIPS?

If we look at some of the central criteria for developing a scientific paradigm, we have to understand the issue of reliability and validity in the measuring process and how this is understood in many scientific circles. While there are many diverse methods of doing research, these criteria provide a link between research on Focusing, typically seen as research in the psycho-social sciences and research in different areas of science. With the issue of reliability, one can ask whether the measuring process is done in a consistent or repeatable fashion. Thus for instance, with many scales there is training of new interviewers or raters so that they are as ‘reliable’ (that is, can obtain the same ratings) as the experienced interviewer.

With the Focusing process itself, the issue of reliability can be very challenging because the Focusing process is about change, and in essence the ‘contents’ are changing with the person’s experiencing (meaning creating) process. One solution has been to develop measures of the person’s ‘mode of experiencing’ or paying attention to their *bodily felt sense*. This situation gave rise to the Experiencing Scale. In developing this scale the issues of reliability and validity had to be addressed (Klein et al, 1969). Related to reliability the question is: *Is it possible that different ‘raters’ can obtain the same rating while listening to an audiotape of an interview or a psychotherapy session?*

Further, is it also possible to determine if there are certain reliable patterns which can be measured ‘in’ a person’s body concurrently with their Focusing process? This issue will be addressed below in a consideration of ways to combine measures of the Focusing process with immunological and neurophysiological measures.

Another way that a new phenomena (in this case, the intricate, complex Focusing process) gains credibility in science is through three types of validity: concurrent, predictive, and consensual validity. When a new phenomena can be shown to have a stable and

strong (but not perfect) relationship with accepted measures, the work relating measures of the new phenomenon to accepted measures is said to satisfy criteria for concurrent validity. Concurrent validity refers specifically to the empirical relationship between a measure of Focusing process and another already established, accepted measure. For example, is there an acceptable relationship or correlation between a measure of Focusing process and a standardized measure of depression?

In the context of this paper, one might ask what is the relationship between, for instance, the Experiencing Scale category and a person's blood pressure response to a stressful situation? One might expect that regardless of experiencing level, people might show a similar physiological response to a stressful event, but that people who are *high experiencing* have a more rapid recovery to normal blood pressure levels than do those who are *low experiencing*. Thus, experiencing level has gained in validity because it has helped to discriminate the blood pressure recovery rate of people exposed to a stressful situation. The relationships in this example are somewhat hypothetical, and initially in a research protocol, it would be important to see if initial stress reactions and rate of recovery vary by experiencing level.

The issue of predictive validity is complex, but one essential feature is that, given that the new phenomena are reliably measured, how well does it predict from one's current status to future status or outcome in the future? For example, we might ask: How accurately are we able to predict how 'well' (and in what situations) a newly trained Focuser will focus in the future? Further, we might ask how well can we predict a measure of the Focuser's depression, life satisfaction, and ability to control their blood pressure, etc. in the future?

Consensual validity usually means that recognized experts come to an agreement that a new phenomena has been documented and is worthy of more complex scientific attention. This issue of the *Folio* is one attempt to build consensual validity about Focusing and research related to Focusing in the eyes of a broader scientific community. Another way to establish consensual validity would be to invite Focusing 'researchers' and recognized scientists to talk with each other about what the important questions are related to advancing research related to Focusing. They could jointly review questions which arise from the existing body of research on Focusing and decide how collaborations between Focusing researchers and other scientists may advance research on Focusing.

A CALL FOR RESEARCH ON FOCUSING AND SCIENCE

There are four broad areas of research. The first is on the Focusing process itself, including what people tell us while they are Focusing, people's process while engaged in counseling and psychotherapy, and how Focusing is taught and learned. Much of this work was reviewed by Hendricks (Hendricks, 2001). A valuable review of these issues and others in developing research on Focusing and science is available (Iberg, 2000).

The second area relates to what difference learning Focusing makes in other aspects of people's living. How does learning Focusing or engagement in Focusing consultation predict other types of functioning?

The third area involves scientific collaboration between Focusing researchers and colleagues from other areas of scientific research. This area involves the ways in which Focusing is related to accepted measures in science and includes what happens concurrently in people's bodies (on a measurable neurophysiological level) while they are Focusing.

The fourth area involves developing collaborations with scientists which might change how we are able to freshly see/attend to the Focusing process and change how scientists ask questions in their own fields.

I will expand on the second to fourth area of research here. (Second Area): How does learning Focusing or engagement in Focusing consultation predict other types of functioning? For a number of years, I worked with a medical researcher to address a serious concern: stress, disease, and health in air traffic controllers—and—to develop a protocol using Focusing instruction in order to examine potential reduction in stress (Bidwell, 1990). The plan was to use a randomized design with two groups: those in the first group who received only the current standard of health care for air traffic controllers, and those in the second group who, in addition to the standard of health care, would engage in an Optimal Functioning Inquiry (OFI) which included attention to Focusing process and experiencing. One of the key points in this research was to measure blood pressure at the same point in time, before the training for both groups, and then to repeat the blood pressure monitoring for both groups after the training was concluded. For several reasons, mainly the inability to attract enough funding, this project has not been completed. I included this project as an indication of the type of research that can be considered in developing Focusing. This kind of Focusing research could make a profound difference in many other aspects of people's living, including their general health and average daily blood pressure.

Grindler & Flaxman (2011) reported a study "Focusing: An adjunct treatment for adaptive recovery from cancer". I encourage the reader to read the research report for more detailed understanding. Using a matched-pairs experimental design, Grindler & Flaxman matched people based on their having a similar clinical rating of survival prognosis following a cancer diagnosis. One group received training in Clearing a Space during six 90-minute sessions, and the other group were a wait list control or comparison group. Grindler & Flaxman then compared both groups on five measures, examining the results for both groups on these measures immediately following the training, and six months afterwards.

The results "showed a significant decrease in depression and a significant improvement in body attitudes for the treatment group when compared to the control group. A trend toward improved scores for the treatment group appeared in hardiness scores and body cathexis scores. At the six-month follow-up, treatment group scores did not change significantly, suggesting that subjects sustained the changes achieved with this intervention over time." (Grindler & Flaxman, 2011; Results section). Related to the issues in this paper on Focusing and science, this study makes an important contribution, including showing that the training decreased depression and body attitude scores and that the results were sustained over a six-month period. This finding reflects the issue of predictive validity, and that the Clearing a Space training can be shown to indicate differences in both established quantitative (depression measure = Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Index—depression

score) and qualitative measures. Very important was the Grindler & Flaxman comment: “It would be very interesting to look at the impact of treatment on more objective dependent measures, such as biological measures of immunocompetence.” (Grindler & Flaxman, 2011, Discussion section). In essence this comment reiterates the main point of this paper build collaborations between Focusing researchers and scientists (experts who measure immune system functioning and possibly researchers who measure chronic stress using neurophysiological measures).

Another recent study reported on the Focusing website, “Effect of ‘Clearing a Space’ on Quality of Life in Women with Breast Cancer” (Klagsbrun, Lennox & Summers, 2011) shows similar promise and reflects positive differences for those who participated in clearing a space training in a quantitative measure The FACT-B (a 44-item self-report instrument designed to measure several facets of quality of life in patients with breast cancer) and a qualitative self report instrument. As in the Grindler & Flaxman study, it would be interesting to look at the influence of treatment on biological measures such as immunocompetence. In other work, it has been shown that writing-therapy can have a positive effect on the immune system (Frattoroli, 2006). Lutgendorf and Ullrich (2002) have shown that in using the Experiencing Scale, the more experiential the writing is, the greater the benefit is to the immune system.

Drawing on these studies and others, I advocate for the inclusion of measures of immunocompetence and neurophysiological functioning (see below) as valid outcomes and potential correlative indicators of the Focusing process (see below) in future research.

The third area of possible research is how Focusing is related to accepted measures in science? In 1977, Norman Don, a colleague of Gene Gendlin’s at the University of Chicago, published a paper: “Transformation of Conscious Experience and its EEG Correlates”, dealing with the relationship between self identified felt shifts and patterns in EEG frequency spectra. According to the article, five people, previously trained in Focusing, gave ‘verbal reports’ about ‘internal experiences’ which were audio taped during sessions that lasted ‘up to 43.7 minutes’ (Don, 1977, p.151). During the sessions, each person’s left occipital EEG’s were recorded onto tape, and later Fourier analyzed by a digital computer into component frequency spectra. Afterward, people reviewed their own audio tapes and selected 1.) Moments where unusual insight and psychological movement were beginning (called ‘felt shifts’ in the study) and 2.) Moments where they experienced the least amount of psychological movement (called ‘negative shifts’ in the study). The study reported that there were significant patterns in the EEG that could be identified about 75-80% of the time—especially when people indicated that they were starting to have felt shifts. In addition, the researchers found a very different distinct pattern when people indicated that they were having ‘negative shifts’.

This research is an example of the kind of collaboration that I propose. While there are uniquely experienced events taking place during each individual’s experiential process, there may be predictable patterns at the neurophysiological level which can be measured. The measures themselves, in this case EEG frequency spectra, can be recognized in broader fields of scientific endeavor, and as such, have their own history of development and

application to other aspects of functioning in the human body. Other measures, for instance changes in blood pressure, cortisol levels, or vagal tone (Porges, 2007), are already seen as acceptable markers of, for instance, ‘healthy’ or ‘stressful functioning’. These results can be used in research paradigms like the one above to infer that Focusing itself can be a healthy, stress reducing process which is probably not harmful, and which can be reliably demonstrated to be a valid indicator of healthy human (neurophysiological functioning). I do not mean to imply that the only area of research relating Focusing to science should be stress reduction or healing and healthy living. However, these areas afford collaborations of the kind I suggest, and there are already precedents in previous research on the Focusing process which could be built upon.

The Don study (1977) was limited and only suggestive of potential relationships between self identified felt shifts and EEG frequency spectra. The research would need to be replicated with more people to see if the same patterns existed. Also the strategy could be reversed so that pattern recognition of the EEG spectra could be done first, to identify the unique patterns thought to be connected to Focusing events. And then, the data for self-identified felt shifts could be examined to see if just by examining the EEG spectra alone there was the ability to identify the times when felt shifts were beginning. Further, one can ask, ‘Are these EEG patterns for each person reliable over time?’ Another question is whether people who have this predictable pattern are similar or different in other types of physiological and psychological functioning? Are there differences between ‘self identified’ (people indicated on the tape when a felt shift was beginning) as compared with ‘other identified’, (others, for instance, those trained in the experiencing scale, indicate where they think a felt shift is beginning)? Finally, EEG measurement has changed since the Don study. There are new ways to quantify and analyze EEG patterns and other measures of neurophysiological functioning are being used in more recent studies, such as functional M.R.I.’s.

Despite limitations in this study, the methodology is promising as a prototype for relating events during Focusing to neurophysiological events in the body (Gendlin & Berlin, 1961). While examining the relationship between events in Focusing and neurophysiological events, it is also possible to concurrently relate the potential linkage to other measures of psychological functioning. So, for instance, one might ask whether people trained in Focusing (and who have these unique EEG frequency spectra) also have lower depression or better documented performance in job interviews, etc.

The fourth area of research potentials centers on two related questions, namely (1) how developing collaborations with scientists might change the way we are able to see/attend to the Focusing process and (2) how a knowledge of Focusing could change the ways that scientists ask questions in their own fields. An example of the first question, how scientific discoveries may help to shed light on processes occurring during Focusing, has been the discovery of mirror neurons—areas of the brain which appear to be activated when we observe or are in the presence of someone else (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004; Molnar-Szakacs & Overy, 2006; Iacoboni, 2009; Ramachandran, 2011). In a way, these findings are the closest that this type of scientific measurement has come to indicating that some aspects of events ‘between’ two people can be experienced ‘concurrently.’

So for example, when we observe someone else reaching for an object, the neuromotor association areas in one's brain related to one's own reaching for an object are 'activated.' The activation of mirror neurons has been connected to watching physical events, watching someone touching someone else, hearing sounds/music and possibly, watching emotional expressions on another's face. The typical focus in new research with mirror neurons has been on brain function and neurochemistry. With the understandings of the experiencing process during Focusing, events are noticed 'in' the body as one's felt sense of the event. During a Focusing session with two people, it would be interesting to see how, and under what circumstances, the listener's mirror neurons are activated when the Focuser is, for instance, ready to have, or having a felt shift. Parenthetically, I think it is problematic to call this event, an event indicative of 'empathy'. The listener may be attentive to subtle changes in the body process of the listener, but cannot know the differentiated inner experience, or meaning-forming that is occurring for the Focuser.

As a Focusing teacher, I often wonder if there are differences in the ability of a listener to attend to, be aware of events in the body of the Focuser, especially, for instance, the forming or changing of 'energy' that can occur as a felt shift is taking shape. I expect that there are individual differences in what I am describing (some people may start Focusing training with this ability and some may not). It would be interesting to see if there are changes in mirror neuron activation (during the beginning of felt shifts) over time during the course of Focusing training. While this is a brief statement of a complex problem, it highlights how advances in neurology and measurement of mirror neuron activation may shed light on questions related to Focusing training and practice.

The second question in the fourth area of potential research concerns how scientists may change their thinking as they build collaborations with Focusing-oriented researchers. We might study how scientists who learn Focusing for themselves begin to change the way they ask scientific questions and therefore modify the nature of their inquiry. Clearly, these changes are outlined in the work on Thinking At the Edge, including an innovative program using training in Thinking At the Edge with Ph.D. students beginning their research (Tokumamru, 2011).

BUILDING FOCUSING AND SCIENTIFIC COLLABORATIONS

Within the Focusing network it is common to think of 'Focusing and . . . ' for example, Focusing and Art Therapy (Laury Rappaport) or Focusing and Preparing For Job Interviews (Jim Iberg), and so on. It may be useful to think of what 'Focusing and Scientific Endeavor' can contribute to medical and health concerns such as: excessive use of prescribed medicines, length of time to heal from certain types of physical injury, and so on. It would be worth studying whether Focusing can contribute to a deeper, more differentiated understanding of the issue, for instance, if healing processes might be complemented or accelerated by Focusing. As Focusing contributes to understanding and changing the 'and', then there is another phase that looks back to Focusing, i.e., what is it about this person's Focusing process? . . . and are there stable differences in individuals where Focusing helps some and does not help others—and so on.

In summary, this paper has suggestions for ways of building on these contributions (finding neurophysiological or biochemical correlates of the change processes influenced by Focusing, and using multiple methods of inquiry such as measures from ‘within’ Focusing research related to other standard, acceptable measures; continuing to validate well used measures with concurrent validation and predictive validity research designs and developing collaborations with researchers who are addressing serious well funded research concerns).

The paper points to a model encouraging those in the Focusing network who want to do research to build bridges and collaborations with people who are involved in other areas of empirical scientific endeavor. It is through these collaborations that a common ground for inquiry and evaluation can be found which may increase the validity of Focusing in the eyes of a broader scientific community. I have outlined some of the basics of what is often called ‘programmatically research’ involving a series of connected studies and ways to look at a research question from different angles using different methods. If the scientific collaborators come to know or learn Focusing for themselves, then the nature of their questions, over time, may change and important life concerns can then be collaboratively researched, embracing both science and the intricacy of inner experience.

This topic, “How knowing Focusing has changed the way I ask questions in my scientific work” is worthy of a conference or another issue of the *Folio*. One simple suggestion arising from this paper and this issue of the *Folio* is to have people who know and value Focusing research talk and meet together to outline: 1. An online consulting service and 2. A ‘research program’ on Focusing and science which can have several key interrelated topics. All of the research does not need to be housed in one place, but there should be a respected ‘lead institution’ and innovative communication and networking strategies to allow Focusing researchers to contribute to the building and advancement of the research program.

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