
The Effect of Holotropic Breathwork on Personality

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Summary: Binarová Denisa: The Effect of Holotropic Breathwork on Personality

The paper investigates the effect of a single or repeated holotropic breathwork session on the certain personality properties, attitudes, and the value orientation. A total of 81 subjects participated in the research (36 “Breathers”, 34 “Non-breathers”, and 11 “First-breathers”). The “Breathers” group comprised individuals having participated in the at least four holotropic breathwork sessions; subjects from the “Non-breathers” group were comparable based on the following criteria: gender, age, and education. The experimental subjects from the “First-breathers” group were initially tested prior to their first holotropic breathwork session and they were retested following the initial session (approximately three weeks later). The variables examined were measured by means of Crumbaugh and Maholick’s Purpose in Life (PIL) test, Harman, Fadiman, and Mogar’s test of attitudes and values (Value-Belief Q-Sort), and Shostrom’s Personal Orientation Dimensions (POD).

As for the “First-breathers”, a significant improvement in satisfaction of the need for the purpose in life and significant reduction of rigidity and dogmatism were observed. The “Breathers” were found to be less rigid and dogmatic compared with the “Non-breathers” (including scientific area), they display a positive change in their attitude towards unusual comprehension of the reality, they profess the conventional values to a lesser extent and apply them in a more flexible manner. In addition, their approach towards the reality is more appropriate, they are more able to enjoy the present moment, they are more autarchic and more independent of other people’s attitudes, they are more sensitive to their own feelings and needs, they are more spontaneous, they express a higher self-esteem, and they show a better capacity to establish warm interpersonal relations. All of the above differences are significant statistically. The “Breathers” do not show a significantly better satisfaction of their need for the purpose in life compared with the “Non-breathers”. Subjectively, all participants evaluated the experience from the holotropic breathwork session as a contribution to a better communication with people, to a deeper knowledge of the surrounding world, and to a higher acceptance of previously rejected opinions and thoughts. **Keywords:** holotropic breathwork, transpersonal psychology, values and attitudes.

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INTRODUCTION

A wave of interest in various techniques connected with the change of cognition has been observed recently especially among the young people. These include various types of meditations, relaxation techniques, yoga practice, and holotropic breathing method. I have decided to investigate the efficiency of the latter technique, the holotropic breathing, since it is supported by a relatively comprehensive theoretical background, it has been applied globally for a number of years, and it seems to produce distinctive therapeutic results. This method was developed by Stanislav Grof, U.S. psychiatrist with the Czech roots, and his wife Christina after experimental application of LSD psychoactive substance [2, 3, 4] had been forbidden in the U.S.A. The holotropic breathing method (holotropic therapy) comprises three basic elements: accelerated breathing, music, and bodywork. The holotropic breathing process usually takes between 2 and 2.5 hours. Both individual

and group therapies are possible. A client plays the major role during holotropic work. A therapist, more often referred to as a facilitator, assumes a role of a person facilitating the therapeutic process. The application areas of the holotropic therapy are relatively extensive.

Interesting results can be achieved when working with individuals suffering from various neurotic and psychosomatic disorders, individuals trying to get rid of a dependence [6], or only struggling for a better self-recognition and seeking resolution of interpersonal conflicts.

The holotropic breathing method was created on the theoretic basis of the transpersonal psychology, which is a relatively young field reflecting primarily the intellectual dimension of a human. The method covers phenomena of so-called extended cognition. The transpersonal psychology makes use of the extended model of the human psyche, which includes the sensory barrier, remembrance and biographic aspects, perinatal

Table 1. Satisfaction of need for the purpose in life (score in the PIL questionnaire) for “First-breathers”

Group	N	Average score - \bar{x}		Diff.	t	p <
		Prior	After			
“First-breathers”	11	113.18	117.18	4.0	3.16	0.05

Critical value $t_{0.05} = 2.23$

Table 2. Satisfaction of the need for the purpose in life for “Breathers” and “Non-breathers” groups

Group	N	\bar{x}	Diff.	t	t^*_a	p <
“Breathers”	36	112.54	-4.76	1.56	2.03	N/A
“Non-breathers”	34	107.77				

Table 3. Average changes of individual elements in the Test of attitudes and values for the “First-breathers” group during the first and second testing (N = 11).

Element	\bar{x}		Diff.	t	p <
	Prior	After			
Rigidity and dogmatism	-11.18	-15.64	-4.46	2.68	0.05
Psychedelic spectrum	49.18	52.27	3.09	1.44	
Conventional values	28.82	24.45	-4.37	1.98	
Inadequate approach to reality	24.18	24.45	0.27	0.15	
Scientific rigidity	1.45	-0.36	-1.81	1.12	

Critical value $t_{0.05} = 2.23$

Table 4. Average score in individual categories of the Test of attitudes and values for the “Breathers” and “Non-breathers” groups

Element	“Breathers”	“Non-breathers”	Diff.	t	p <
	N = 36	N = 34			
Rigidity and dogmatism	-9.28	1.77	11.05	7.01	0.001
Psychedelic spectrum	52.33	33.18	-19.15	9.49	0.001
Conventional values	27.61	34.68	7.07	3.42	0.01
Inadequate approach to reality	26.53	29.5	2.97	2.71	0.01
Scientific rigidity	0.89	10.32	9.43	6.97	0.001

$t_{0.001} = 3.45$, $t_{0.01} = 2.65$

area connected with experience concerning birth and death, and transpersonal area.

This somewhat controversial branch of modern psychology is criticized sharply for its alleged irrational approach, overestimation of the biological childbirth significance, and attempts to unify science and mysticism. The major deficiency of the transpersonal psychology consists in the fact that its theories and conclusions are not based on the scientific research; these are pure speculations unsupported by actual evidence [8].

A very few research projects have been published up to the present time covering the efficiency of the holotropic breathing method. Thus, in my paper I aimed at the experimental verification of effects of the holotropic breathing session on certain personality aspects.

MATERIAL, METHOD

The research project was divided into two, to a certain extent independent, sections. The first of them involved comparison of subjects, who had taken part in the holotropic breathing sessions for at least four times (“Breathers”), with individuals who had never experienced this method (“Non-breathers”). Both groups are comparable based on the following criteria: gender, age, and education. The second section of the project involved comparison of test results obtained for subjects, who had been tested before their initial holotropic breathing session and retested after the initial session (“First-breathers”). The sessions were supervised by the certified holotropic breathing instructors.

Table 5. Average changes of individual elements in the POI questionnaire for the “First-breathers” group during the first and second testing (N = 11).

Element	\bar{x}		Diff.	t	p <
	Prior	After			
Time competence	17.45	17.91	0.46	0.79	
Orientation of conduct	84.00	85.64	1.64	0.84	
Self-fulfillment values	21.09	20.64	-0.45	1.17	
Existentialism	23.27	23.55	0.28	0.56	
Emotional reactivity	15.64	16.00	0.36	0.48	
Spontaneity	13.55	14.82	1.27	1.59	
Self-esteem	11.73	12.64	0.91	2.09	
Self-acceptance	15.18	15.09	-0.09	0.17	
Human nature	11.73	12.64	0.91	1.99	
Synergy	7.64	7.55	-0.09	0.21	
Acceptance of aggressiveness	14.45	14.00	-0.45	0.68	
Intimate contact ability	18.27	19.27	1.00	1.29	

Table 6. Average score in individual categories of the POI questionnaire for the “Breathers” and “Non-breathers” groups

Element	“Breathers”	“Non-breathers”	Diff.	t	p <
	N = 36	N = 34			
Time competence	16.97	15.32	-1.65	3.05	0.01
Orientation of conduct	85.78	79.97	-5.84	2.44	0.05
Self-fulfillment values	20.47	19.56	-0.91	1.65	
Existentialism	23.19	20.50	-2.69	3.21	0.01
Emotional reactivity	16.03	14.65	-1.38	2.00	0.05
Spontaneity	13.89	11.26	-2.63	4.24	0.001
Self-esteem	12.44	11.32	-1.12	2.28	0.05
Self-acceptance	15.69	14.79	-0.9	1.07	
Human nature	11.75	11.79	0.04	0.11	
Synergy	7.64	7.06	-0.58	1.78	
Acceptance of aggressiveness	13.97	15.18	1.21	1.59	
Intimate contact ability	18.39	16.44	-1.95	2.39	0.05

$$t_{0.001} = 3.45, t_{0.01} = 2.65, t_{0.05} = 1.99$$

A total of 81 subjects participated in the research; of these 36 subjects in the “Breathers” group, 34 in the “Non-breathers” group, and 11 in the “First-breathers” group. All experimental subjects completed a set of tests having comprised the following: Shostrom’s Personal Orientation Dimensions (POD) questionnaire measuring the level of similarity between the participant’s score and the score of the self-updated subject (as per A. Maslow), Crumbaugh and Maholick’s Purpose in Life (PIL) test identifying the level of satisfaction of the need for the purpose in life [1], and Harman, Fadiman and Mogar’s Value-Belief Q-Sort questionnaire determining certain approaches and opinions [5]. In addition, the subjects from the “First-breathers” group completed the Ditman and Hayman’s questionnaire, the purpose of which is to record the subjective evaluation of contribution of experience gathered during the holotropic session. The experimental subjects from the

“Breathers” group were asked to describe some of their experience in a more detailed manner.

RESULTS

Purpose in Life test

Statistically significant increase of the score in the PIL questionnaire and thus also statistically significant increase of the satisfaction level of need for the purpose in life occurred in the “First-breathers” group due to the holotropic breathing session (see Table 1).

From Table 2 it follows that subjects from the “Breathers” group showed a higher average scope in the PIL questionnaire, and thus higher purpose in life

satisfaction level, compared with the “Non-breathers” group, however, the difference did not reach the statistical significance.

Value-Belief Q-Sort test

Statistically significant reduction of rigidity and dogmatism occurred in the “First-breathers” group due to the holotropic breathing session. As for other elements, the differences are not significant statistically (see Table 3).

From Table 4 it follows that the subjects from the “Breathers” group show statistically significant reduction of rigidity and dogmatism compared with the subjects from the “Non-breathers” group. In addition, the “Breathers” tend more to the magic comprehension of the reality and mystic way of thinking, they profess the conventional values to a lesser extent, their approach towards the reality is more appropriate, and they are also less rigid in the field of science. All of the above differences are significant statistically.

Personal Orientation Inventory (POI) questionnaire

Table 5 indicates clearly that the subjects from the “First-breathers” group did not show statistically significant change in any of the categories due to the holotropic breathing session.

Compared with the “Non-breathers”, the subjects from the “Breathers” group (see Table 6) are significantly more able to enjoy the present moment, they are more independent of other people’s beliefs, they are more flexible in their approach towards values, they are more sensitive to their needs and feelings, they are more spontaneous, they have a higher self-esteem, and show a better capacity of establishing warm interpersonal relations. All of the above differences are significant statistically.

The differences in other categories did not reach the statistical significance.

QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT

The testimonies of subjects who had participated in the holotropic breathing sessions for at least four times were classified into eight categories according to any of the following elements that predominated in the respective experience: physical feelings, body motions, emotions, energy, insights, life of the experiencing individual, circumstances concerning birth, and crossing the limits of the common reality. The latter three categories correspond to the Grof’s classification of experience into biographic, perinatal, and transpersonal.

Selected examples

R. J.: “The experience consisted in the fact that I felt a kind of pipe inside of myself (in the area of chest, abdomen, and lower abdomen), which was twisted at the bottom just like bowels. It was alive for sure and it was very pleasant and mainly funny. I totally enjoyed pouring water into that pipe (drinking) and trying to fill

it that way. When moving (dancing), the level in the pipe was splashing, and when emptying myself (urinating) I had to laugh loudly. When I was taken past a mirror, the pipe inside of me turned towards the mirror.”

R. G.: “...I engaged the whole body in that dance while sitting, I felt the energy waves in various parts of my body – warmth in the abdomen area, chill in the cervical spine, and so on.”

H. C.: I am sinking into the darkness, the black spiral is dragging me into its center. The chill and small space is getting smaller and smaller and I can perceive a strong essence of feelings of inconclusiveness, despair, and approaching death. I fell in panic since I knew that I would have died if I had not gone out. However, there was no light to show the path, just the diminishing space, I could not fit in. Suddenly something broke inside of me and I felt an enormous will to fight – at that moment I understood that the spontaneous ambition to die is wrong; I was saved by the will, whose exact meaning was unknown to me. My desperation grew bigger; I was screaming that I wanted to go out or I would have died. The deeper was my desperation, the bigger was my will to get out – TO BE BORN.”

L. H.: “During one breathing session I was underground and I had depressive thoughts. Suddenly I felt that a shoot is growing from me towards the surface and then a beautiful white flower further to the sky. At that moment there was nothing more important in the world than that beautiful white flower in bloom. At the same time I felt, saw and perceived to have become a plant, how the nutrients are wandering from the roots to the flower on the cellular level, how the new cells are clustering and dividing to form that beautiful white flower. The flower was the most beautiful and most important.”

J. Č.: “At one moment I become a drop of dew. I was unbelievably clean, I was able to reflect all colors of a rainbow sent to me by the Sun, and I could feel the moisture and life I was giving to the Earth. Then I was flowing down the grass or I evaporated to the air. But I did not feel sorry about that – I knew I would fall down again the next morning, at a different place.”

DISCUSSION

With respect to statistically significant changes having occurred between the first and second testing of subjects from the “First-breathers” group we may claim that the holotropic breathing method lead to the reduction of rigidity and dogmatism and temporary increase in satisfaction of the need for the purpose in life.

It remains questionable whether the changes occurred between the “Breathers” and “Non-breathers” groups are caused by the holotropic breathing method, or whether these personality properties, attitudes, and values are already present in individuals who decide to take part in the holotropic breathing session. To answer this question I would be necessary to perform a long-term research, which would monitor the experimental subjects from the time prior to the initial holotropic breathing session

through to the subsequent sessions. Subjects without any experience with the holotropic breathing session would be monitored during the same period. Preliminarily we can state that the research indicates that the above mentioned personality properties and tendencies are already present in individuals who decide to take part in the holotropic breathing session and that this method ensures a certain development in the indicated direction in these areas. This would mean that the holotropic breathing method attracts individuals, who already show certain tendencies and that it is not coincidental that just these people take part in the holotropic breathing session.

Our results can be compared with the research of the single LSD intoxication effect, which was performed at the time when this method was applied experimentally in the Czech Republic (Hrůza et al., [5]). It is interesting that while statistically significant increase of satisfaction of need for the purpose in life (score in the Purpose in Life test) occurred in the "First-breathers" group after taking part in a single holotropic breathing session, no statistically significant changes occurred in this test after the single LSD intoxication. Nevertheless, the difference between the scores achieved in this test for "Breathers" and "Non-breathers" groups does not reach the statistical significance. Thus, the holotropic breathing method leads (contrary to the single-time LSD intoxication) to temporarily increased satisfaction of the need for the purpose in life. However, the satisfaction level later returns to the original level and does not differ significantly from the score achieved by the subjects who had never participated in the holotropic breathing session. Statistically significant reduction of rigidity and dogmatism occurs after taking part in one holotropic breathing session, which conforms to the results achieved by Hrůza et al., who identified reduction of rigidity and dogmatism after the single-time LSD intoxication. Moreover, Hrůza et al. discovered a significant positive change in approach towards the unusual and mystic comprehension of the reality (psychedelic category in the Value-Belief Q-Sort questionnaire). The experimental subjects from the "First-breathers" group, however, did not show a significant increase in this category. As the difference between the scores obtained for the "Breathers" and

"Non-breathers" groups does not reach the statistical significance it can be assumed that it would be necessary to take part in multiple holotropic breathing sessions to ensure a positive change in approach towards the unusual and magic comprehension of the reality, while one session only would suffice in case of the LSD intoxication. It can be concluded that despite the experience invoked by these two different methods are basically identical, the resulting changes are not identical even though they display similar trends.

CONCLUSION

The research showed that a significant increase of satisfaction level of needs for the purpose in life and reduction of rigidity and dogmatism occur after taking part in a single holotropic breathing session. Compared to the "Non-breathers", the subjects who have participated in the holotropic breathing session for at least four times were less rigid and dogmatic, including the field of science. These individuals display a positive change of attitude towards the unusual and magic comprehension of the reality, they profess the conventional values to a lesser extent, their approach towards the reality is more appropriate, they are more able to enjoy the present moment, they are more autarchic and more independent of other people's attitudes, they are more flexible with respect to values, they are more sensitive to their own feelings and needs, they are more spontaneous, they express a higher self-esteem, and they show a better capacity to establish warm interpersonal relations. All of the above differences are significant statistically. The subjects from the "Breathers" group do not show a significantly better satisfaction level of their need for the purpose in life compared with the individuals from the "Non-breathers" group.

The experience from the holotropic breathing session was considered beneficial by the majority of experimental subjects. The benefits included a better ability to treat other people, deeper understanding of the surrounding world, and better acceptance of previously rejected ideas and opinions.

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