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The Importance of ‘Becoming Aware’

Pratik Vyas, Petia Sice, Robert Young, Nick Spencer
Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

Developing an adequate co-creative capability to allow for socially responsible action is of critical importance in the current climate of swift changes and within the context of globalisation and communication opportunities and challenges presented by day to day advancements in information technologies. This paper presents a perspective on enhancing co-creative capability through the practices of ‘becoming aware’. These practices are related to particular qualities of attention, i.e. being fully present, empathy, compassion and non-judgement. Awareness development practices are recognised to affect not just the individuals but also groups, teams and society.

The purpose of this article is to explore and reflect on the meaning and usefulness of the concept and practice of developing awareness and its potential impact on developing the qualities of intention, attention and meaningful action. The exploration is based on reviewing relevant literature, as well as on interviews with practitioners from the Daoist, Buddhist and the ancient indigenous American traditions. We suggest that that understanding of awareness as an embodied state of being (individually and collectively) provides a coherent perspective on developing a co-creative capability of moral intent, attentive presence and meaningful action.

On the Act of ‘Becoming Aware’

The rational view of human activity suggests that human action involves two aspects: doing (physically engaging with the world) and reflection (mental engagement). Heidegger (1958) tells us that a human being is not an isolated worldless subject, but is an entity that in its every essence is constituted by its world. It is our way of being in the world that implies that we are constantly acting (or in Heidegger’s terms ‘thrown’) within some situation. Because of this, Heidegger suggests that doing is more fundamental to understanding than reflection. As an example, Heidegger suggests that ‘when hammering you are involved in the activity of hammering and not in reflection on the hammer for example, reflection comes in when a breakdown in the activity occurs’ (Heidegger 1958). We believe that this interpretation is too restrictive and it is more correct to suggest that reflection exists in the activity of hammering all the time. The hammerer is tacitly aware and reflecting (moment by moment), at least on the current outcome of the activity, and adjusting his actions accordingly. Thus, we would argue that both doing and reflection are equally fundamental to the human way of being and, therefore, cannot be separated or ordered in priority of being more or less fundamental to human understanding.

Whilst doing and reflecting are inseparable from the process of knowing, we should realise that there is another form of action that (although often unappreciated within Western culture) is equally important to knowing the World: The action of examining personal experience, or as Varela puts it 'the act of becoming aware' (Depraz, Varela and Vermersch, 2001). While Eastern traditions such as Buddhism and Daoism, have developed the act of 'becoming aware' as part of their meditative practices and as a way of life, in Western culture, exploring personal experience has been neglected as an action fundamental to being and knowing. This neglect, however, can lead to a false fragmentation, since it is now understood that awareness, feeling and reasoning are very much interrelated (Varela, 1996). Our experience of the world is born in our interactions with the environment and these are validated by our embodiment (Sice&French, 2004). These experiences represent an irreducible first-person ontology (Searle 1993). Thus, we cannot explain experience 'on the cheap', by assuming a third person or objective viewpoint (Varela, 1996) What is required is to recognise that both first-person and third person accounts, and their interplay, are necessary in order to do justice to the quality of our knowing. This is where many philosophical investigations of experience have had difficulty, since in general they deal with the issue of exploring human experience as one of pure reflection (Chalmers 1993, Heidegger 1958).

Enactive cognitive science points to an alternative: What is needed, is a disciplined act of cultivating our capacity 'of becoming aware' of the sources of our experience and, thus, opening up new possibilities in our habitual mind stream. In Varela's work, this action of becoming aware is punctuated by three 'gestures': (1) Suspension – a conscious transient suspension of beliefs about the thing being examined; (2) Redirection – turning ones own attention from the object to its source, backwards towards the arising of the thoughts themselves; and, (3) Letting go - changing ones attitude from looking for something to letting it come. ((Depraz, Varela and Vermersch, 2001)

Action in terms of 'doing' or 'reflection' is an activity of the actor towards or in response to the environment. The act of becoming aware, on the other hand, is one of uniting, connecting within (to self and body) and without, i.e. being part of the environment, experiencing being part of the universe.

Eastern Awareness Practices in the West

According to Dryden and Still (2006), the influence of Eastern thought and awareness development concepts and practice began developing greater momentum in post-World War II Japan, when physicians, scientists, and other intellectuals from the West were exposed to Japanese culture, including the many manifestations of Zen Buddhism. There is currently a significant interest in neuroscience (contemplative neuroscience) to study the impact of awareness practices such as Mindfulness, Transcendental Meditation, Qigong on health, quality of attention, creativity, etc. (Davidson&Belgley, 2012).

Mindfulness has been referred to as “the heart” of Buddhist meditation (Thera, 1962). The state of mindfulness inhabits the core teachings of the Buddha (Gunaratana, 1992; Hanh, 1999; Nanamoli & Bodhi, 1995). Mindfulness traditionally has been recognised to affect not just individuals but also groups, teams and society. The collective mindful state has been described by the Sanskrit word *dharma*, which carries the meaning of *lawfulness* (individual as well as collective). Baer(2003) states that mindfulness is related with particular qualities of attention and awareness that can be cultivated and developed through practices such as meditation. Kabat-Zinn (2003) provides an operational working definition of mindfulness as “The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment”.

Three key elements of the definition — intentionality, present-centeredness, absence of judgment — are repeated and reinforced both in the ongoing scientific-research-oriented discussions of mindfulness based practices (MBP), and through MBP teachers in hundreds of classes unfolding week by week around the world (McCown, 2009, Davidson and Begley, 2012). An attempt to define mindfulness as a process or mode of being and to identify the mechanisms of action that may contribute to the improvement — even transformation — of participants, a necessary parsing of the various forms of meditation practice presented across the range of spiritual traditions, particularly Buddhism, was performed by Goleman (1977/1988), who describes meditation approaches of *concentration* and *insight*, and who in discussing insight meditation explicitly uses the term *mindfulness* in the way it has entered current discourse. *Concentration forms* of meditation teach a focus on a single object of attention, such as the breath. *Insight forms* teach attention to all experiences arising in the sense perceptions and the domains of thought and emotion. Goleman explains the commonly exploited interrelation of these two forms, as concentration practice develops qualities of mind that support insight practice. Goleman’s description of mindfulness (1988, p.20),

Our natural tendency is to become habituated to the world around us, no longer to notice the familiar. We also substitute abstract names or preconceptions for the raw evidence of the senses. In mindfulness, the meditator methodically faces the bare facts of his experience, seeing each event as though occurring for the first time.

is a concise foreshadowing of the current attempts in the scientific literature to define mindfulness and its mechanisms of action.

The act of ‘becoming aware’ is not confined to the Buddhist practices of mindfulness, characteristic of which is the focus on the ‘breath’. Other traditions offer different practices of ‘becoming aware’. Some of those main traditions are: Daoism as the Chinese Wisdom tradition, ‘most universally developed repository of practices working directly and actively with the vital energies of the lived body’ (Depraz, Varela

and Vermersch, 2001), Transcendental meditation using a Hindu mantra meditation focus (Mahesh Yogi, 1960), Heart praying (stemming from Christianity), the Jewish Kabala, the Sufi traditions, etc. (Depraz, Varela and Vermersch, 2001).

‘Awareness’ Intervention Approaches

Rothwell (2006), Still (2006) and Martin (1997) all delineate two different intellectual environments that have influenced and contributed to the contemporary approaches to ‘awareness practices’ in research and clinical applications. On one hand there are the holistic approaches, mostly adopted during cross-cultural experiences with the east. They are associated with the basic insight of the meditative traditions, epitomized in the paradoxical turning towards one’s symptoms and with an appreciation of the religious roots and resonances of meditation practice that can be found within contemporary psychodynamic, humanistic, transpersonal, and postmodern streams of psychotherapy (e.g., respectively, Epstein, 1995; West, 2000; Boorstein, 1996; Norum, 2000). In this approach, interventions incorporate meditation and spiritual practices to cultivate ways of being, rather than specific outcomes (Rothwell, 2006). Such interventions are building their own evidence bases, strengthening their appeal within the social and cultural discourse that has allowed integrative medicine to grow and flourish. On the other hand there is the discourse associated with the cognitive behavioural therapies. Within these therapies, identifiable forms of mindfulness-based or informed intervention have arisen, which may or may not include meditation practice for cultivating mindfulness, and which predict outcomes based on cause and effect (Rothwell, 2006). Such interventions have found significant appeal within the dominant social and political discourses and practices of health care, particularly in the U.S., where evidence-based practices have a preferred status (Ma and Teasdale, 2004). However, there have been very few ‘awareness’ based interventions in a group context. (i.e. co-creation context)

Co-creation and ‘Becoming Aware’

Autopoiesis (theory of the living) suggests that experience is clearly a personal event, but that does not mean it is private, in the sense of some kind of isolated subject that is parachuted down onto a pre given objective world. Mind and world are not separate. The senses do not perceive ‘the world’; instead they are participating parts of the mind-world whole. (Sice&French, 2004)

An investigation of the structure of human experience inevitably induces a shift towards considering several levels of my consciousness as ‘inextricably linked to those of others and to the phenomenal world in an emphatic mesh’. (Varela, Thomposn and Rosch, 1995). This irreducibility of human experience, from the duality portrayed by the embodiment and the situatedness of the human agent, cannot be underestimated when developing approaches for responsible cocreation.

Consequently, the 'separation' of first-person vs third person accounts is misleading. It makes us forget that: so called third person, objective accounts are done by a community of concrete people who are embodied in their social and natural worlds as much as first-person accounts. The line of separation between rigour and lack of it is not to be drawn between third and first accounts, but rather on whether a description is based on a methodological ground leading to a communal validation and shared knowledge. It follows, therefore, that the processes of co-creation must be in harmony with the process of 'becoming aware' to allow for creation of shared meaning and motivation for action. The cultivation of the capacity 'of becoming aware' is the basis for human creativity and success (Sice&French, 2004).

Qualities and Values Cultivated through Awareness Practices

Developing awareness essentially means to train the mind and body. Review of studies of Mindfulness and Qigong practices suggests that the purpose is to cultivate the qualities of:

- Non judgement - all that is needed is to watch what is happening, including how we habitually judge & react to our own experience.
- Patience – impatience yanks at a knot in shoe-laces and ends up making the knot tighter than before. Patience unravels the knot carefully, one loop at a time.
- Open curiosity – 'In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's view very few.' Seeing things, childlike, for the first time.
- Trust - listening to and trusting the self.
- Acceptance – In mindfulness practice we cultivate acceptance by taking each moment and each aspect of our experience just as they come, focussing on the present and being receptive to the flow of all that comes to us without striving.
- Letting go – acknowledging whatever arises, then letting it pass when it will, making space for the next moment and the next experience.
- Nurture of compassion, empathy, and acting from one's highest self. (Davidson&Begley, 2012; Depraz, Varela and Vermersch, 2001; Jaworski, 2012).

Towards Research in Enhancing Co creation through Awareness and Dialogue

The unity of social systems is generated through the network of conversations that language generates and which, through its closure, generates language itself (Maturana and Varela, 1980)

However, whether language is exploited to promote creativity or to stifle it depends on the quality of awareness of the human actor, both individually and as a collective. What is required is that we foster an environment where our awareness of ourselves and of our surroundings is actively developed. This, however, is not enough; in addition, we need to observe the conditions under which quality of conversations is maintained, to encourage new linguistic distinctions based on new experiences and awareness to emerge. Improving quality of conversations means improving our understanding of others, of others views and assumptions. Dialogue is important where we pursue a generative space encouraging opening up and engaging ourselves in listening with no other purpose than to hear what it is that is being said, whilst trying consciously to suspend our assumptions and judgements (Bohm, 2000). This type of interaction we shall call meditative listening:

We believe that there exist practices that enhance the ability of the group for meditative listening and has a direct impact on the group's co-creative ability. We are focusing our research on prototyping and evaluating practices of meditative listening that develop heightened awareness and the ability to be fully present both individually and as a collective at the same time shaping a generative space of dialogue and exploration.

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