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The Politics of Placebo

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Abstract. This article explores definitions of the construct placebo in a political context.

How does one develop faith that a specific act may have a causal relationship with an event occurring after this act occurs--when the act is applied to a person or people and the event includes a consequence to whom it is applied? One road to faith is the statistical comparison of the number of times the event occurs after the act with the number of times the same event occurs after no such act or some other act. The possibility that "no such act" having ontological status is tenuous enough, so the comparison may only be between the occurrences of the same event after different acts.

In contrast to an act to which one has posed some degree of faith--as to its causal relationship with some succeeding event--and to which one hopes to develop more faith, is there some special set of characteristics of some other act that renders the latter significantly valuable in developing more faith in the causal properties of the former? In other words, what set of characteristics optimally constitute a placebo? Scientists seem to agree that there is some such set, but frequently disagree about what it might be.

Critique of act characteristics that may optimally constitute placebos. (In this discussion, the construct act may be single and discrete, a continuous phenomenon over some temporal interlude, multiple and discrete over some temporal interlude with equal or unequal spacing, or some combination of these.) First, the act should have no effect whatsoever--i.e., it leads to no event. Then when contrasted with another act to which faith has already been posed, further faith can be developed towards that latter act. In other words, the event in question may well be causally related to the second act, because no events lead from the first. However, there are several problems with this approach to the placebo construct. For example, as alluded to above, can any act truly be construed to have absolutely no effect? Moreover, just because an event occurs in the presence of one act but not in the presence of the other does not suggest that another act or acts is not causally implicated as well as or instead of the initial act. This last point is especially salient when the event in question does not always follow from the act to which one has posed faith--and instead either no event or various other events may occur.

Second, the act should be harmless. The problem here is that an act may be harmless (to those to whom the act is applied) but have other effects that complicate statistical comparison of events occurring after it with those occurring after an act to which one has already posed some hope. This approach may be intended to be benign from a moral point of view, but may actually be malign from moral and ethical perspectives in that it can harm people and science, respectively.

Third, the act should be like the act to which one has posed some faith in every possible way, except some feature of the latter act, which forms the basis of the faith posed towards that latter act. This "act within an act approach" quickly becomes convoluted, as the feature in question may not only be an act in itself but something that is not required by a particular act or even most acts. And there is an even more significant problem with this approach involving the temporal interval between an act and the moment(s) that the search for the event that may or may not be said to lead from this act occurs. If the

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event may be found at some moments, it may not be at other moments--the converse as well. In addition, event occurrences may or may not be found depending on the moments that an act has actually been applied. Moreover, when multiples of the same act are applied, how these multiples are bunched and the varying intervals between applications--and the multiples and intervals not applied--further hinder causal attribution.

Ultimately, the placebo construct must be viewed in a political context. The sequences of logic girding the construct also gird the political authorities controlling knowledge as to what is acceptable as knowledge. The results of studies employing variations on the placebo construct affect the profit margins of companies, corporations, and individual researchers. Situations wherein the frequency of salient events stemming from placebos is statistically insignificant from that stemming from acts to which one has posed and developed faith may have their own causal relationship with political crises within academia and throughout public discourses affecting political power. And perceptions of acts, events, and the contexts in which they are embedded are themselves imbued with politics. In a world of infinite psychopolitical need and finite resources to meet these needs, the placebo construct is under ongoing pressure from all sides engaged in political conflict. (See Benedetti, F., Amanzio, M., et al. (1998). The specific effects of prior opioid exposure on placebo analgesia and placebo respiratory depression. *Pain*, 75, 313-319; Davidson, J.R.T., Malik, M.L., & Sutherland, S.N. (1997). Response characteristics to antidepressants and placebo in post-traumatic stress disorder. *International Clinical Psychopharmacology*, 12, 291-296; Storosum, J.G., Elferink, A.J.A., & van Zweiten, B.J. (1998). Schizophrenia: Do we really need placebo-controlled studies? *European Neuropsychopharmacology*, 8, 279-286; West, R., & Willis, N. (1998). Double-blind placebo controlled trial of dextrose tablets and nicotine patch in smoking cessation. *Psychopharmacology*, 136, 201-204.) (Keywords: Placebo, Power.)