

Three Basic Elements of Kurtz's  
Refined Hakomi Method  
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Abstract

This paper explores three basic elements of the refined Hakomi method of assisted self-study. The use of loving presence, indicators, and experiments done in mindfulness is discussed with a view to the theoretical and applied relevance of these concepts. Recent discoveries in neuroscience are used to support the validity of the method to bring unconscious material into consciousness so that it can be examined and changed.

Clinical Application of Main Learning Points  
in Hakomi Training

Hakomi is the psychotherapeutic method developed by Ron Kurtz over several decades. Always firmly situated in the realm of body psychotherapy, Kurtz's approach has undergone many important changes, and Kurtz has discarded some of the early elements such as character structures and added new ones such as the use of assistants, touching and comforting, and the deliberate use of silence to wait for associations to arise spontaneously. Kurtz calls the current version of his method the "refined method of assisted self-study" (or self-discovery), referring to one of the major conceptual changes, which shifts the focus from a person in crisis seeking therapeutic help to a person curious about getting to know themselves better. This is in keeping with the Greek precept of "γνώθι σαυτόν", inscribed over the portico of the temple of Apollo at Delphi. In order to free ourselves from unnecessary suffering, we have to become aware of who we are and fully understand ourselves and our motivations. In this paper, I would like to explore some of the main concepts of the refined Hakomi method and investigate their clinical application within the setting of assisted self-study.

Loving Presence

A significant piece of the evolution of the refined Hakomi method is the focus on the appropriate state of mind of the practitioner in order to facilitate the assisted self-study of the client. Kurtz (2009) considers loving presence the main and most important task of the therapist and describes it as a combination of emotional state, attitude, and focus of attention. Kurtz maintains that the inclusion of this fundamental state of mind of the practitioner has made the Hakomi method much more effective. One reason for this is that being held in loving presence allows the client to feel understood, cared for, and safe. A calm, attentive presence signals to the client that the practitioner is connected to her and ready to join her on her journey in an unhurried, unstrained way, without the need to achieve or accomplish anything. In addition, the focus on the present moment required by this state of mind prevents the practitioner from getting drawn into superficial conversations and information-gathering. How can such a state be achieved? Kurtz suggests to look for something in the client that is lovable, beautiful and nourishing, something that inspires compassion and empathy and touches the heart. What both practitioner and client intuitively perceive as a closer connection and an opening of the heart is supported by neuroscience. Lewis, Amini, and Lannon (2000) use MacLean's model of the triune brain to explore what happens in our brains when

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we feel emotions such as love. The authors explain how the limbic system comprising the hippocampus, amygdala, anterior thalamic nuclei, and limbic cortex responds in limbic resonance to people we feel close to and synchronizes with them in a process called limbic regulation. This limbic attunement allows us to sense the internal state of another person and adjust our own physiology accordingly. A mother who cradles her upset baby so it can listen to her heartbeat is a good example of how limbic resonance and regulation help the baby calm down. At the same time, the mother benefits from this two-way regulation mechanism. In the long term, our early experiences of successful or failed limbic regulation in infancy and childhood affect not only our personality, but also our emotional health. In therapy, a limbic connection is established between the client and the therapist, and through this the client can experience a corrective experience of limbic resonance. The authors argue that the techniques that various therapies employ to effect change are not nearly as important as the ability of the therapist to establish a limbic connection to the client. Kurtz agrees with this proposition when he considers the single most important factor for the success of the Hakomi method to be a state of loving presence on part of the therapist. This state creates the best possible conditions for a healing relationship between therapist and client. For Kurtz, limbic resonance can only happen if the therapist is fully connected to the client's present experience. This requires the therapist to pay close attention to what the client is experiencing in the present moment, to deeply care about her experience and to understand it. Kurtz often uses contact statements such as "Some sadness, huh" to name the client's present experience and indicate that he is aware of the client's feelings. Kurtz believes that a connection between therapist and client can only be established if the therapist has the ability to get and stay in contact. He emphasizes that this contact not only allows the client to relax in the feeling that the therapist is present to her, but also enables the therapist to anticipate the client's needs.

Kurtz (2009) states that his insights into the importance of the right state of mind of the therapist have been influenced by Buddhist thinking. In Buddhist tradition, the four key aspects of love are loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. The Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (1997) defines loving kindness as the "intention and capacity to offer joy and happiness" (p. 4). He continues that in order to develop this capacity, we must attempt to understand the needs of the person we love. When we offer our love, it needs to be unconditional and not expect anything in return. The compassion aspect of love is our deep concern for a person in suffering. Hanh explains that when a person extends compassion to another, deep communication and communion is established between them. Moreover, compassionate words, actions, and thoughts have the potential to reduce suffering. The aspect of joy means delighting in the small things that we experience in the present moment. The last aspect, equanimity, means to consider all things equally and not get attached to anything in particular. True love does not discriminate or cling and it is free of prejudices. It allows people the freedom to be exactly who they are. All these aspects can be found in the concept of loving presence that Kurtz proposes: The therapist meets the client from a position of unconditional love, and with deep concern and compassion. She delights in sympathetic joy, when she witnesses and shares her client's happiness. At the same time, she maintains an appropriate level of equanimity expressed in a calm demeanor, a soft voice, and a natural sympathetic facial expression. All this contributes to increase the client's self-regulation and promote feelings of safety and being cared for. Equanimity allows the therapist to sufficiently detach from the client's suffering so as to be of help to her. Given the importance of the right state of mind, Kurtz considers the spiritual development and the personhood of the therapist essential in the refined Hakomi method. Rather than an expert attempting to heal a client, the Hakomi therapist is a spiritual friend who supports and assists the client on a healing journey.

The influence of Buddhist and Taoist philosophies on Kurtz (2009) also becomes apparent in his strong belief that there is a natural way for things to unfold that requires no interference from another person. If no external forces are applied, things will take their natural course. They will unfold in their own way and in their own time without any requirement as to what shape or form this should take: What happens is simply what happens. The job of the therapist is not to try and control the process, but to recognize what will initiate healing and to supply that.

Kurtz (2009) points out that some people are naturally good at being in loving presence. Their

habitual state of being loving, compassionate, and present can have a major impact on how the client's social engagement system responds. This system is part of the ventral vagal complex of the parasympathetic nervous system and is unique to mammals. It supports social behavior and communication with the environment, promotes calm states, and is implicated in self-regulation and attention (Porges, 2001). In evolutionary terms, it is more recent than the dorsal vagal complex of the parasympathetic nervous system, which governs digestion and (in life-threatening situations) also immobilization responses, and the sympathetic nervous system, which mediates fight and flight responses. These three systems are involved when a person tries to assess the level of threat or danger a situation or another person poses. Depending on the outcome of that assessment, an immobilization, mobilization, or social communication/ engagement response is triggered. Porges (2004) coined the term "neuroception" (p. 19) to describe how neural circuits assess a situation as safe, dangerous, or life threatening. Porges states that neuroception takes place in the unconscious parts of our brain. Even though we are not consciously aware, our brains immediately assess the risk and initiate defensive maneuvers in the case of danger, or prosocial behavior in a safe environment. Kurtz understands that loving presence provides the perfect conditions to activate the social engagement system: The practitioner's tone of voice, facial expressions, pace, attitude, calmness, attention, compassion, and kindness allow neuroception to detect safety and trigger prosocial behavior. The Hakomi practitioner can thus serve as a conduit through which the client's perceptions and self-knowledge can change.

Kurtz (2009) strongly believes that loving presence is a skill that can be learned by any good-hearted, warm person who is willing to be present with another person in open and honest human-to-human communication. Next to the willingness of the client to engage in assisted self-study, Kurtz considers the ability of the practitioner to maintain a state of loving presence as the single most important factor for the success of the Hakomi method.

### Indicators

In the refined Hakomi method, indicators are an integral part of the work of assisted self-study. Originally, Kurtz (2009) taught character theory as described in the works of Wilhelm Reich and Alexander Lowen. In keeping with Reich's and Lowen's proposition that our bodies hold the information to all our history, Kurtz engaged in readings of body postures and shapes to gain insight into a person's defenses and habitual responses. At a later stage, Kurtz moved on to the much more general concept of indicators. Indicators are external signs of habits, memories, and implicit beliefs that organize a person's experiences and behavior. Kurtz distinguishes between signs of present experience and indicators of core beliefs. A client may, for example, tell the therapist about the death of her partner with her eyes starting to water, a sign that she is feeling sad. An indicator, on the other hand, is at work when somebody consistently speaks fast because he is afraid that the other person's attention will not last until he finishes his story. Indicators are habitual, adaptive behaviors which are non-conscious and are an expression of implicit beliefs and formative experiences. Among the major groups of indicators are a person's habitual posture, tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and speech patterns. Kurtz lists several common indicators together with an explanation of their possible meaning. When a client thrusts his chin forward, for example, it can indicate stubbornness, or when a client's eyes are constantly scanning the room, it may alert the therapist to possible trauma. A client who has her eyes closed when speaking to the therapist may indicate that she does not want to be interrupted, or a client who keeps interrupting himself may have a fear of making mistakes. A very good way to find indicators is to look for the expressions that are left over in a person's face when he or she is in a relaxed state. Kurtz points out that many psychotherapeutic modalities use indicators in the form of symptoms, from which the practitioner derives a diagnosis that determines the appropriate treatment. For a trauma therapist, for example, the hypervigilance displayed by a client's incessantly scanning eyes would be described as sympathetic activation, and the treatment would seek to reduce the arousal of the sympathetic nervous system. In Hakomi, the use of indicators is different: Indicators serve as the building blocks for experiments done with the client in a mindful state to bring the non-conscious organization of behavior, thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes into consciousness. Once they have been made conscious, change and choice

are possible. Unrealistic and unsatisfying beliefs that cause the client suffering can then be challenged and replaced with more realistic and nourishing beliefs. Kurtz states that he gets most of his information about a client from observing nonverbal indicators. The story that the client has to tell is secondary, and Kurtz believes that asking questions and listening to answers and explanations is not conducive to finding out about the client's core beliefs. These core beliefs get expressed in habitual patterns that are governed by unconscious rules. A skilled therapist can make guesses about these rules and devise experiments that allow the client to experience these rules in action.

When asking the question why things move into the unconscious in first place, we find different answers. For Freud, the unconscious was the repository of a person's repressed desires, memories, and impulses. Since these were deemed unacceptable, they had to be kept outside conscious awareness as a basic defense mechanism of the ego. Freud's view of the unconscious was quite negative and limiting. This changed somewhat with Jung's addition of the collective unconscious, which was a more universal concept that contained the archetypes. A much more positive interpretation of the unconscious is offered by Wilson (2002), who suggests that many of our thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and motives remain outside of awareness for reasons of efficiency and not because of repression. Wilson uses the term "adaptive unconscious" (p. 23) to refer to non-conscious thinking as an evolutionary adaptation. He argues that the quick and effortless non-conscious processes involved in assessing our environment and reacting accordingly have been a survival advantage. While many of these processes never reach our conscious awareness, they nonetheless influence our feelings and behavior. Wilson argues that our brain has the ability to multitask: While the conscious part of our brain is busy dealing with a task we consciously attend to, our adaptive unconscious can simultaneously process huge amounts of data, sort, interpret, and evaluate them, and react effectively. This is why we can have a lively conversation with the person on the passenger seat while driving a car. If everyday routines are handled by the unconscious, consciousness is conserved for other tasks. However, because we do not have direct access to the adaptive unconscious, it is hard to know ourselves truly and fully. Wilson maintains that we have to deduce our unconscious motives and thoughts by using our behavior and other people's reactions to us as signposts.

This is exactly how a Hakomi practitioner proceeds when she looks for indicators as an expression of the client's non-conscious material. The end result can be observed, and it is the practitioner's task to deduce what unconscious processes have produced it. Kurtz (2009) calls this process of making educated guesses about the client's unconscious beliefs "reverse engineering" (p. 41). When a Hakomi practitioner works with a client who habitually tilts his head to one side, she asks herself the question what belief system may lie beneath this repetitive behavior. Maybe the client does not trust other people or has doubts about whether he is being told the truth. Based on the guess that the practitioner has about the underlying belief, she can then devise an experiment to bring unconscious behaviors and beliefs into consciousness. The reaction to an experiment is neither deliberate nor intentional. However, it provides a unique opportunity to observe the adaptive unconscious and automatic behaviors in action.

#### Experiments Done in Mindfulness

Kurtz (2009) follows the scientific steps proposed by Feynman to create models of the rules that govern the client's unconscious behavior and to design experiments with which these rules can be exposed. Feynman (1998) states that science is based on the principle that experiments are the test of all knowledge. In order to uncover the laws that govern the natural world, we have to make guesses about the patterns that lie beneath them and then devise experiments to test the accuracy of our hypotheses. Feynman believes it requires huge imagination to deduce generalizations from just a few hints. This is the beauty of the Hakomi method in the hands of a skilled practitioner: to combine imagination, intuition, and instinct to make educated guesses about the client's models and belief systems based on observed indicators and test these guesses with experiments. For example, if the practitioner has guessed from certain indicators that a client has a core belief of never expecting any support, she may set up an experiment to test this hypothesis. The experiment can be designed as a verbal statement offered to the client or can be physical, such as an action or movement. For example, a client who has experienced neglect when growing up, may be offered the statement "I am here for you," or a client who habitually tilts her head because she has

learned not to trust other people may be asked to hold her head straight and see what happens. If the practitioner's hypothesis is correct, the experiment will most likely produce an emotional reaction and/or insights. The verbal statements or "probes," as Kurtz calls them, always contain a potentially nourishing phrase ("I am here for you," "It's okay to be spontaneous," "You're a good person.>"). If the therapist has guessed well, it may make the client aware of a longing she has suppressed, because strong and painful memories are attached to it. All this may come into consciousness through the experiment, which—if effective—can provide the client with a missing experience, allowing her to complete a painful experience and replace it with a more nourishing one. Kurtz emphasizes that the more the practitioner is able to follow the lead of the client's unconscious, the more easily it will guide her to the missing experience.

In Hakomi, experiments are set up in a very precise way. At first, the practitioner describes the experiment to the client and provides clear instructions as to what it will look like and what is expected from the client. For example, the practitioner may say: "I would like to do an experiment. For this, you'll go into a mindful state and let me know when you're ready. I will then make a statement and we'll see what your immediate reaction is." When the practitioner has ascertained that the client is willing to do the experiment, she asks the client to go into a mindful state. This is a very important part of the experiment and cannot be rushed or omitted. Signs that the client is in a mindful state are increased stillness and fluttering eyelids over closed eyes.

Why is it so important that the client is in a mindful state and what is a mindful state anyway? Kabat-Zinn (1994) defines mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (p. 4). He points out that this kind of attention improves our awareness, clarity, and perception of the present moment and cautions that its absence can keep us stuck in automatic and unconscious actions and behaviors. Siegel (2007) considers mindfulness a form of intrapersonal attunement that allows us to become our own best friend. He states that mindfulness helps us regulate our emotions, combat emotional dysfunction, and improve our patterns of thinking. It is only in stillness that we can observe ourselves and decouple the automaticity of our thinking. Simply put, being mindful means being aware of what is happening as it is happening. Being aware of the present moment in a nonjudgmental way contributes to both compassion and inner well-being. Clients who have never worked with mindfulness may initially require some help to enter this state of stillness. Brown and Ryan (2003) state that while almost everyone has the capacity to become mindful, people differ in their willingness to direct attention to their present-moment experience. Also, variations in the capacity to become mindful are common and depend on a number of factors. Stress and fatigue, for example, can inhibit a person's ability to enter a mindful state, whereas relaxation may enhance it. Focusing on the breath is a good starting point to help a client become connected to her inner experience. She may be told to observe her sensations, thoughts, and feelings without getting attached to them, and to become aware of the present moment without getting caught up in memories of the past or projecting into the future. After a while, the inner dialogue will quieten. The client is encouraged to observe the process from an open, accepting, exploratory, and curious place, without judging or evaluating her experience. However, this mindful state is far from being passive. It is actually a state of heightened awareness that Martin (1997) describes as receptive attention. For Kurtz, this calm and centered state of mind in which a client can observe her reactions is the fastest, most efficient and effortless way to access the adaptive unconscious.

Kurtz (2009) cautions that the Hakomi method of assisted self-study is not suitable for everybody. It may not work for very anxious or easily distracted people, for people who are not able to enter a mindful state, for people who do not want to do experiments or engage in the process of self-study, or for people who only want to engage in talk therapy.

Kurtz (2009) explains that one reason for doing experiments in Hakomi is the intention to make the client's predictions fail. According to Hawkins (2004), the main function of the human neocortex is to make predictions. His theory of a "memory-prediction framework" (p. 104) argues that the brain is a memory system that stores experiences and memories. These serve as a repository from which we construct an internal model of the world. When we receive new information, we compare it with what is already stored in the repository and use it to predict the future. This is possible because the neocortex

stores sequences of patterns and expects the same sequence to unfold when it senses a similar pattern. All of this can occur without our conscious awareness and we only notice that something is different when our memory prediction fails. For example, if I automatically reach for the toothbrush in the morning because I expect to find it in its usual place, but somebody moved it to a different location, I will consciously notice. If the toothbrush is in its usual location, I will start to brush my teeth without conscious awareness of where it is. In the refined Hakomi method, many unconscious, automatic behaviors are seen to follow the sequences of the memory-prediction framework. They are often early adaptations which at the time helped to protect us, but may have outlived their usefulness in the present and instead cause us mental and emotional suffering. Kurtz argues that in order to change these outdated behavioral strategies, they must first be brought into consciousness. This is exactly what experiments are designed for: When the client's memory-prediction framework yields a different result from what is expected, the client consciously notices the change. She can then explore what kind of prediction sequence leads to what kind of automatic behavior. Once automatic and unconscious core beliefs have been brought into consciousness, they can be examined and their negative influence diminished. This initiates a process of change and healing for the client and over time should result in new, more beneficial behavior patterns that are conscious, not automatic, and do not cause the client unnecessary suffering.

Kurtz (2009) states that it is important to get information about the outcome of the experiment to know how to proceed further. Sometimes the outcome can be clearly observed by the practitioner, and other times the client may need to report on her experience. If the experiment was effective, the client may have an emotional reaction or insight that reveals her unconscious beliefs. However, it is also possible that the experiment does not yield the imagined outcome, in which case the practitioner has to refine or modify her original hypothesis and design another experiment. This process is repeated for as long as it takes for the client to become conscious of her underlying models of herself and the world.

According to Kurtz (2009), Hakomi is unique in the way it uses experiments done with a client in a mindful state to access the implicit beliefs and early adaptations that get reflected in the client's habitual behavior. A well designed experiment is able to evoke emotions, memories, and reactions that make the unconscious conscious.

For an experiment to be well designed, it requires the practitioner to be aware of her own unconscious beliefs. Otherwise the experiment may access the therapist's unconscious more than the client's. In psychodynamic therapies, this is labeled "counter-transference" and plays a major role in theory and practice. Kurtz, on the other hand, does not appear to address this issue in great detail. The Hakomi practitioner seems to be expected to be sufficiently aware of her own counter transference to know when her own feelings and reactions distort her perception. When experiments repeatedly fail, it may be advisable for the practitioner to ask herself if maybe she is getting caught in a transference/counter transference loop.

### Conclusion

The three elements described above—loving presence, indicators, and experiments done in mindfulness—are core elements of the refined Hakomi method of assisted self-study. The concepts are easy to understand and simple. However, they require certain skills, which are a necessary and important part of the training. Rather than teaching techniques, Kurtz focuses on teaching skills. Once a practitioner becomes proficient in these skills, she has limitless possibilities to use them in a creative way. The beauty of Hakomi is that it only uses a handful of basic building blocks to weave together therapeutic tapestries of infinite complexity, depth, and variety. Kurtz has developed and refined his method over several decades, and what he has found intuitively, is increasingly supported by the hard facts of science. The simplicity of the current version of the method belies the richness of thoughts, ideas, and insights that have gone into developing it. Kurtz is extremely well-read and knowledgeable, and draws on the fields of psychology, biology, neuroscience, literature, physics, mathematics, and Western and Eastern philosophies to carefully select knowledge that supports his vision. Over the last years, Kurtz has gone to great lengths to identify the essentials of the method, and the result is a deceptively simple tool with complex underlying data contributing invisibly in the background, just like Wilson's fast and effortless

adaptive unconscious. The work of Ron Kurtz will continue to evolve and change in a powerfully simple way.

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