“Echo Attributions” and Other Risks when Publishing on Novel Therapies without Peer Review

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A special series on Thought Field Therapy in the Journal of Clinical Psychology provides an opportunity for psychologists to learn about techniques and theories outside the mainstream of our field. Unfortunately, by publishing this series of manuscripts without meeting the standards of peer review, the Journal also provides an avenue for the misuse of its good reputation and the improper promotion of untested methods. “Echo attributions” can be made whereby an author attributes the source of his own words to the professional journal in which the text appears. Historical examples illustrate that such misuse of scientific journals and institutions occurs. A formal statement of guidelines is needed to instruct authors on appropriate versus unethical representations of their publications. © 2001 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. J Clin Psychol 57: 1245–1250, 2001.

Keywords: Thought Field Therapy; echo attributions

Thought Field Therapy (TFT) was developed by Roger Callahan in 1981 based on ancient Chinese theories concerning the flow of energy along meridian lines and the realignment of these energy fields when blocked or unbalanced (see www.tftrx.com). Callahan has

This article was published as an open review of published manuscripts in this journal. It was not subject to peer review. The absence of prior peer review of both the research articles and the reviews themselves emanated from concerns expressed by Dr. Roger Callahan that the review process was biased against TFT. This article was published as an open review of the original research article of TFT. The reader is encouraged to read the original article, along with this accompanying review, and the final critique of the Journal’s decision to publish this set of nonreviewed articles to gain a perspective on the issues presented. —Larry E. Beutler, editor.

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applied TFT to the treatment of numerous ailments, advanced extraordinary claims of rapid cures, and promoted use of his method through expensive workshops and numerous self-help publications. All of this has occurred in the absence of controlled research (Gaudiano & Herbert, 2000; Hooke, 1998).

The demise of Thought Field Therapy in professional circles was at hand just a short time ago. In 1999, the Arizona State Licensing Board sanctioned a psychologist for the use of TFT, declaring that the technique did not meet current standards of practice. Soon thereafter, the Continuing Professional Education Committee of the American Psychological Association issued a memo to the effect that workshops offering training in TFT should not receive continuing education credits. The memo was dated November 5, 1999, and stated: “[The Committee] has determined that, at this point, Thought Field Therapy as a topic for continuing Education for psychologists does not meet the current criteria for appropriate curriculum content. Effective immediately, the topic of Thought Field Therapy should not be included in programs that are offered to psychologists,” if seeking APA approval for continuing education. Lilienfeld and Lohr (2000) welcomed these events, and reflected the views of many psychologists who could not accept untested notions about blocked energy channels, bad toxins, and the tapping of energy meridians.

Publishing without Peer Review

Now, with the publication of this special series in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (*JCLP*), Thought Field Therapy is making an appearance in an established, peer-reviewed journal. Perhaps this is a positive development. Arguably, there is some value in exploring novel ideas that challenge current paradigms and practices. Scientific progress in applied endeavors, after all, benefits from and probably requires clinical innovation (Davison & Lazarus, 1994). Further, those who promote TFT have felt unfairly treated and excluded from peer-review journals. In this context, the editor of *JCLP*, Larry Beutler, has taken a bold and creative step by inviting proponents of TFT to publish manuscripts without the hurdle of peer review, but with accompanying critiques, thereby providing a public forum (Callahan, 2001a, 2001b; Johnson, Shala, Sejdijaj, Odell, & Dabishevci, 2001; Pignotti & Steinberg, 2001; Sakai et al., 2001).

Unfortunately, the decision to publish this special series creates a number of risks. First, there is the possibility of compromising the very foundation and standards that define *JCLP* as peer-reviewed and scientific. Next, there is the risk that developers of other interventions that lie outside the mainstream of normal science (Kuhn, 1962) will demand equal consideration. Thought Field Therapy is only one in a growing list of “Power Therapies” (Figley, 1997; Rosen, Lohr, McNally, & Herbert, 1998) that all claim powerful if not miraculous cures. Proponents of any of these alternative treatments may ask why TFT was provided special privilege while they were not. If conspiratorial theories hold that scientific institutions close their doors to novel therapies, there is little reason to believe this series will put such thinking to rest.

Of equally great concern is the possibility that current publications in *JCLP* will be used to counter future sanctions such as those provided in the past by the Arizona State Licensing Board and APA’s Continuing Professional Education Committee. And last, there is the very real possibility that this special series, and the scientific reputation of *JCLP* will be misused in the service of promoting Thought Field Therapy.

History Demonstrates the Misuse of Scientific Institutions

Two historical examples demonstrate that current concerns are warranted. The first comes from Fishbein (1932) and Walsh (1912), who have discussed the history of a placebo
“cure” developed by Elisha Perkins, a New England physician of the late eighteenth century. The following quote comes from Walsh (1912, p. 48), who had this to say in a section titled, “Perkins, Prince of Quacks”:

Dr. Perkins must have been born under a lucky star; at least he lived in fortunate circumstances for his purposes. Galvani’s discovery of the twitchings that occur in the frog’s legs when a nerve-muscle preparation or its equivalent was touched by metals in contact, had aroused world-wide discussion as to the place of electricity and magnetism in biology. Volta’s brilliant experiments, which led to the invention of the Voltaic Pile, still further increased men’s interest in this subject. It was then that Dr. Perkins came to exploit these electrical and magnetic ideas in medicine by means of a very simple invention.

What Dr. Perkins invented in 1796 was a “Metallic Tractor,” that came to be called the “Perkin’s Tractor.” The device consisted of a tuning fork-like object made from a combination of many metals. Evidently, Dr. Perkins believed that the combination of metals created positive forces such that diseases could be “drawn” from the body, always by moving the Tractor from the affected area toward the extremities, never in the opposite direction. Of course, over time, it became clear that powerful cures attributed to Perkin’s Tractors came from the imagination of his patients. Fishbein (1932, p. 108) explained how the final blow came when “very practical common-sense” physicians made tractors out of wood, but “colored them exactly like the original, genuine tractors,” proceeding to effect similarly striking cures. All of this, however, did not stop Dr. Perkins from spreading his invention to Europe, establishing the Perkinean Institution in London in 1804, and distributing publications through the Perkinean Society. Of particular relevance to the current series of papers in *JCLP* is Walsh’s (1912, p. 50) discussion of additional marketing efforts by Dr. Perkins:

The attention of the scientific world was rather cleverly managed. Dr. Perkins presented a pair of tractors and the book that he had written about their use to the Royal Society. The custom of that learned body was to accept such presentations by a formal letter of thanks and place the objects and books on their shelves. No formal investigation of the claims to scientific consideration of such presentations was made. All possible advantage was taken of the fact that the Royal Society had accepted the new invention and had publicly thanked the discoverer for it. How characteristically recent this old story is; it is renewed on every possible occasion and wears all the familiar aspect of modern devices for securing recognition and obtaining the apparent approbation or recommendation of some scientific society or institution.

The tale of Elisha Perkins, his tractors, and the misuse of scientific institutions would be an amusing, but historically distant one, if not for the relevance of this story to current issues. In this context, two recent incidents can be cited that involved the most widely publicized Power Therapy of present times—Eye Movement Desensitization, and Reprocessing (EMDR). Like TFT, EMDR involves a novel technique and accompanying neurological theories whereby alternating bilateral stimulation is claimed to accelerate information processing (Shapiro, 1995), thereby eliminating severe anxiety and numerous other disorders with just a handful of sessions. Although the face validity of this technique is questionable, and theoretical explanations untenable (Lohr, 1996; O’Donohue & Thorp, 1996), EMDR is claimed to have been taught to over 50,000 clinicians worldwide in just over ten years. The founder of EMDR, Francine Shapiro, also published a popular book (Shapiro & Forrest, 1997), claiming to have discovered a “breakthrough” treatment that represented a major “paradigm shift” in the field of clinical psychology. On the back jacket of this book were numerous endorsements and supportive statements, among which was the following:
EMDR “comes of age.” . . . Recent independent studies have found it up to 90 percent successful. —American Association for the Advancement of Science

When we learned of the apparent endorsement of EMDR by one of the most prestigious scientific organizations in the United States, AAAS was contacted and asked about the situation. McNally (1999) has provided an account of what followed. Once notified of the situation, AAAS investigated and found that the source of the quote was a reporter’s statement on Science Update, a radio show sponsored by the organization. Evidently, the reporter had summarized or paraphrased what Shapiro had said about EMDR, and his repetition of Shapiro’s comments appeared on Shapiro’s own book, under the heading, “endorsed by academicians.” The quote also appeared on the EMDR Website until AAAS took action to have it removed.

The incident with EMDR and AAAS can be referred to as an “echo attribution,” whereby the original messenger attributes the source of a communication to the mountain that sends it back. As it turns out, the AAAS incident was not the only occasion in which Dr. Shapiro quoted what were essentially her own words, in an effort to lend legitimacy and generate widespread interest in EMDR. A separate incident involved the Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy (AABT) and its publication, the Behavior Therapist. As explained by Antoinette Zeiss (1998), then president of AABT:

Earlier this year, I was given a copy of an advertising flyer sent out by the EMDR Institute. It contained the following reference: “Clients are at risk if untrained clinicians attempt to use EMDR” (the Behavior Therapist, 1991). The citation refers to a letter to the editor that Dr. Shapiro had previously sent to tBT, but this was not indicated in the flyer, which was mailed out widely. After discussion with the AABT Board, I talked with Francine Shapiro, Ph.D. (head of the EMDR Institute) about our concern over this statement. Specifically, this reference implied that AABT, through its newsletter, had taken a position on EMDR that we had not taken.

Guidelines for Citing Publications

Historical lessons should not go unnoticed. With the publication of this series, one can easily imagine proponents of Thought Field Therapy promoting the method by making reference to the Journal. Consider, for example, a recent book by Trubo, Callahan, and Mindell (2001), “Tapping the Healer Within: Using Thought Field Therapy to Instantly Conquer Your Fears, Anxieties, and Emotional Distress.” This book is featured on the “Callahan Techniques” Website (www.tftrx.com) under “Self-Help Products.” There it is claimed:

Now the founder of TFT shows readers how to harness its healing powers on their own, to overcome phobias, anxieties, addictions, and other common psychological problems. The process combines principles of Western and Eastern healing methods, using energy points in the body to release emotional distress.

Putting aside for the moment, general concerns about untested self-help books and exaggerated claims that mislead the public (Rosen, 1993), imagine how the next edition of Tapping the Healer Within could now add to its promotional blurbs, “As reported in the Journal of Clinical Psychology, a peer-reviewed scientific publication.”

1The origin of the phrase “echo attribution” comes from an occasion when Jeffrey Powel, Ph.D., Seattle, learned of the EMDR incident with AAAS and said, “That’s just like an echo.”
Also possible is the occurrence of an echo attribution, whereby specific text from one of the articles is quoted and ascribed to the Journal. It also is of concern that future restrictions on continuing education credits for TFT workshops, or sanctions resulting from clinical use of the method, will be countered by citing the present articles, perhaps ignoring that they were not peer reviewed.

It may be that concerns expressed in this commentary will remain just that, and authors will not misuse their articles to promote Thought Field Therapy. Publication of this commentary may itself reduce the risks attendant to this series by specifically stating the issues and providing historical and recent examples. At the same time, it would be helpful if JCLP issued a formal statement of guidelines so that authors were very clear on what constitutes an improper or unethical representation of published articles and their content. By taking such preemptive action, the possible benefits of a public forum on novel therapeutic procedures will not be offset by the risks of such action.

References


