Science Wins: A Televised Test of “Psychic Healing”

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On 18 June 2003, a crew from Channel Nine Australia’s popular *A Current Affair* news program filmed an experiment conducted by Bond University psychologists Norman Barling, Michael Lyvers and Jill Harding-Clark that was designed to test the claims of a well-known Australian “psychic healer.” Dennis Puffett says he can relieve pain simply by manipulating people’s photographs, even when the “patients” themselves are far away— even as far as Africa! Twenty volunteers who suffered from chronic pain were recruited for the study via advertisements in a local newspaper. Participants were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups, with 10 per group. After completing a consent form, photos were taken of all participants. They then completed a questionnaire designed by Lyvers assessing belief in psychic healing, paranormal phenomena, hypnosis and alternative medicine, after which Barling obtained initial McGill Pain Questionnaire ratings from each participant. Then as all participants waited in a nearby room, Lyvers gave Puffett each photo, as well as information about the type and location of pain, for each participant in the treatment condition. While being filmed by the TV crew, Puffett attempted to relieve the pain of each participant whose photo he was given, and was allowed as much time as he required per photo to perform his “healing” ritual. Upon completion of the “healing” procedure for all 10 participants in the treatment condition, Barling obtained McGill Pain Questionnaire ratings from both treatment and control groups a second time. The experiment employed a double-blind design, that is, neither the participants nor the psychologists who evaluated them knew to which condition, treatment or control, each participant had been randomly assigned.

All participants then assembled together in another room. Channel Nine reporter Mimi Kwa (who was also blind to each participant’s group) asked them to raise their hands if they had felt any improvement in their pain. Of the 8 participants who raised their hands, 5 were from the control group (not subjected to “psychic healing”), and only 3 were from the treatment group (subjected to “psychic healing”). Analysis of McGill Pain Questionnaire data indicated no difference between treatment and control groups. Exactly half of the participants in each group gave worse ratings and half gave better ratings on the second McGill, which is what would be expected by chance. Thus, the findings unequivocally showed no effect whatsoever of the “psychic healer” despite his animated claims to the contrary.

Some very interesting findings were nevertheless obtained. The 8 participants (3 treatment, 5 control) who said they felt better after the “healing” period scored statistically significantly higher on faith in alternative medicine compared to the 12 participants who said they did not feel better after the “healing” period. Even more interesting, the change in McGill Pain ratings was highly and statistically significantly correlated with faith in alternative medicine, belief in psychic phenomena, belief in psychic healing, belief in hypnosis, and belief in Dennis Puffett’s psychic healing ability. These correlations ranged from .50 to .70, which are surprisingly high. Thus, irrespective of whether they were in the “psychic healing” group or the control (untreated) group, those who had strong beliefs in psychic healing, psychic phenomena, alternative medicine and hypnosis tended to show positive changes on the McGill Pain Questionnaire over the course of the experiment, whereas those without such beliefs did not. The findings indicate that anecdotal accounts of so-called “psychic healing” represent a kind of placebo effect that is strongly dependent upon the “patient’s” degree of belief in such phenomena.

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