

News Release

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The Suppression of Innovation in Social Work: The Case of “Energy Psychology”

A decision by the editor of *Research in Social Work Practice* has brought to a halt an emerging dialogue about the introduction of acupuncture and other “energy” techniques within clinical social work. The journal published a negative review of the approach, most commonly known as “energy psychology,” last November (<http://rsw.sagepub.com/content/22/6/647.abstract>).

Advocates of energy psychology found the paper—by Brandon A. Gaudiano, Lily A. Brown, and Ivan W. Miller—to be seriously flawed in that it did not acknowledge the existing evidence supporting the efficacy of the method. It also presented questionable data that denigrated clinicians who utilize energy therapies. A letter was sent by Mary Sise, LCSW, a former President of the Association for Comprehensive Energy Psychology (ACEP), to the journal’s editor, Bruce Thyer, asking if he would consider a rebuttal. On Oct 26, 2012, Dr. Thyer replied by e-mail:

I would be happy to entertain a response to this paper, and you are invited to prepare one, co-authored with folks you deem appropriate. . . . I will invite Dr. Gaudiano et al. to respond to your reaction, and I may invite others to do so as well . . . I would publish this set together in one issue, and every one would be noted as invited and accepted at the discretion of the Editor, as opposed to having undergone peer review.

With this invitation, Ms. Sise, selected three other leaders in the field to co-author with her a rebuttal. These included practitioner/researchers from Harvard Medical School, the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, and the Washington University School of Medicine. They wrote and submitted what they considered a well-reasoned paper that met high academic standards in respectfully countering Gaudiano et al. point for point.

Dr. Thyer replied that he had decided not to publish the exchange after all. Given his original invitation, one can only surmise that the rebuttal was more effective than he anticipated, revealing the extraordinary bias in the piece published in his journal. The rebuttal also potently countered criticisms of energy psychology previously published by Dr. Thyer.

In justifying his decision to reject the paper, Dr. Thyer echoed the thesis of the original paper, saying "my take of the research on so-called energy therapies is that they are elaborate placebos." He did not address or even acknowledge the substantial body of research cited in the Sise paper. He also cited as a reason for his decision his objection to claims of "energy fields unknown to science." Again, he did not address or acknowledge the dozens of scientific studies of such energy fields referred to in the rebuttal paper. The studies cited in the rebuttal, however, besides presenting scientific evidence that supports the existence and effects of energy fields on biological systems, include 18 randomized controlled trials that establish the clinical efficacy of energy psychology interventions.

Energy psychology has indeed been highly controversial. Early claims about its power and speed in treating a range of clinical conditions were not backed by efficacy research. A 13-year battle with the American Psychological Association (APA), ended last November when, based on 39 studies conducted in the past four years, the APA reversed its position by allowing courses in energy psychology to be provided for APA CE credit.

The article in *Research in Social Practice* seemed to be written with no knowledge about these developments. It seemed, in fact, to Sise and her colleagues, to be unconscionable that such a prestigious journal would encourage its readers to discount a promising clinical method with a polemic piece designed to discredit a significant area of innovation. It was, in fact, puzzling to them that such an exorbitantly distorted presentation of the existing literature could even survive a peer review process. *Research on Social Work Practice* is ranked 5th in impact of 41 social work journals (<http://rsw.sagepub.com>). Its mission statement describes it as “a disciplinary journal devoted to the publication of empirical research concerning the assessment methods and outcomes of social work practice.”

This de facto censorship and substitution of existing research with pure opinion is not consistent with the journal’s mission statement or the ethics of the social work profession. In addition to inhibiting scientific debate, it prevents social workers—to the degree that they rely on the authority of their own publications—from learning about innovations which, by definition, go beyond conventional practices. Readers can assess the controversy for themselves by reading the rebuttal at <http://www.energypsych.org/Gaudio-rebuttal.html>.