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Research Paper

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Healing Touch: A Growing Discipline

Healing Touch (HT) is a relatively new form of healing that was founded in the 1980's as a continuance to nursing programs (Eschiti 10). However, its use and practice has already gained numerous followers and influenced many studies to show its effects on patients. Healing Touch was founded by Janet Mentgen who “was an energetically sensitive nurse” who saw the “positive effects of touch” in conjunction with Western medicine (Healing Touch Program 2009). In essence, HT is defined as “a non invasive therapy” that includes touch and non touch of a person's “biofield or energy field” (*What is Healing Touch*). This “energy field” extends beyond the human skin allowing for an aura to be recognized and felt through the use of a healer's hands. A practitioner of HT “uses a conscious, intentional process of directing energy through their hands” to accomplish the balance of this extension of a person (*What is Healing Touch*). Some healers say they can feel or even see a person's “biofield” making this type of healing highly specific to each practitioner (Sutherland 820). An individual's energy field in relation to HT is “in a continual state of flux, and varies continuously in its intensity” and at times, “these continual variations can significantly disrupt the human energy field causing physical and psychological distress” (Vickers 50). In this way, the etiology of illness and pain can be caused by a disruption. Touch or non touch style HT is

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subjective to specific healers and specific patients but both result in similar effects on the targeted area. Lower amounts of stress, anxiety, and balance are commonly described after sessions as well as a feeling of “togetherness with oneself” (Sutherland 822). Healing Touch has been shown to “elicit a profound relaxation response, enhance wound healing, reduce post surgical pain and use of pain medication, reduce tension headache pain and anxiety, and to enhance mood and well-being in individuals with serious illness” (*What is Healing Touch*). The specific movements of the hands and where they are placed over or on the body depends on the nature of the clients ailments. For example, a person with chronic headaches may be concentrated upon the head, seeking to relieve the chronic pain and to alleviate stress (Healing Touch 147). According to Healing Touch International which is endorsed by the American Holistic Nurse's Association, a balance of a person's biofield must be restored to its equilibrium in order to effectively heal (Healing Touch Program 2009).

The concept of equilibrium is an essential world view of many other cultures and healing modalities. In Chinese medicine according to Jonathan Dodds, equilibrium applies to organs, seasons, and even elements. These different concepts have counterparts that are constantly in flux. If even one of these aspects is lacking or has a surplus of “ying and yang,” sickness can occur (Dodds). Healing touch operates on

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these same principles. A person's energy field must be in balance for complete health (Eschiti 10). This practice is part of healing touch's world view in which a person is part of a larger cosmos in which everything is connected. Janet Mentgen states:

Healing Touch and other energy-based therapies such as acupuncture, Reiki, reflexology, and therapeutic touch use the concept of field theory that states that our being does not stop at our skin. Just as our lungs are an open system with air moving in, through, and out, our body also is an open system that experiences input, throughput, and output of energy. Based on this understanding, the practitioner uses direct contact or noncontact “touch” to influence the human energy field and affect the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions of the patient. (Eschiti 10)

This holistic view encompasses a person's health into the larger aspect of the cosmos in order to more comprehensively heal. HT methods are practiced in the U.S. “by over 30,000 nurses” and there are multiple continuing nursing programs designed to elaborate and teach this complementary form of healing (Healing Touch Program). A Healing Touch Certified Practitioner Pin is given to those who have completed courses in HT and who encompass and value Healing Touch's benefits (Healing Touch Program). The use of HT is practiced by nurses, alternative healers, and people alike who specialize in this modality but is open to anyone who wants to gain a deeper understanding of energy healing. With HT in practice in over 32 countries it is a growing field that continues to gain a following (Healing Touch Program 2009).

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Part of the reason HT has been successful in the U.S. is its beneficial results in pain management and providing connectivity to a person's own self. For Western doctors and alternative healers, pain is a quantifiable aspect of a person's life that can be difficult to manage (Sutherland 820). The influential aspects have been noted in the HMO-Based Prospective Pilot Study of Energy Medicine for Chronic Headaches. This study stated that "45% of the U.S. population seeks medical help for pain during the course of their lives" and Healing Touch therapy helped to diminish pain in their participant selection (Sutherland 819)." Not only did this study reduce the frequency, length, and intensity of chronic pain headaches, it also made an important link. The patients who entered the study who were not part of the placebo group were more connected with themselves, and reported "having what may be called transformative experiences;" a positive side effect that could not have been predetermined at the conception of the study (Sutherland 825). HT can also be used to heal emotional problems as well as the physical. In another study looking at dementia patients, the study found results that patients were more cooperative and attentive after intervention HT sessions (Doherty 29). Due to its power to relax and allow people to connect to their emotions, Healing Touch is useful to people who are "undergoing life transitions" (Wardell 150). Many people who are undergoing chemotherapy and radiation seek HT

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as a means to become more attune with themselves (Wardell 150). A patient's ability to connect emotionally to themselves and their healer allows the client to become more intimate in an otherwise impersonal setting. In one study, participants in the HT group reported feeling “relaxed, more open minded, and better able to study and think along with better sleeping patterns” (Wardell 153). Along with helping heal emotional wounds the “aim of all touch therapies is relaxation” (Healing Touch 3). At St. Joseph's Hospital in St. Paul, Minnesota, 90% of people studied choose to undergo HT before and after an open-heart surgery. Those who received this intervention had “shorter hospital stays than those who didn't” suggesting HT's power to heal and relax people undergoing traumatic events (Healing Touch 3).

In particular, cancer studies show a variety of benefits and positive outcomes for participants. HT treatments are currently “ongoing in Hawaii, New York, and Colorado” which seek to outline the exact effects of HT on patients (Wardell 150). “Post-White and colleagues (2003)” used HT to “measure the effects on pain, nausea, fatigue, and anxiety of chemotherapy patients” (Wardell 150). In total, 164 patients were tested and the results showed an almost unanimous increase in quality of life. Significant immediate effects were seen in reduced fatigue in comparison to the control group and significantly reduced pain as well as lowered mood disturbance also

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characterized the results. However, no observable effects on nausea were reported (Wardell 150). Aside from cancer related symptoms, participants enjoyed the HT sessions and commented on their “overall helpfulness and satisfaction.” In women from a different study “receiving radiation therapy for gynecological or breast cancer” results were similar. All sixty-two women had “statistically significant” increases in “mood, physical functioning and pain reduction” (Wardell.150). Upon conclusion of these programs and other programs like these, “many of the study participants” were disappointed that the sessions had ended and wanted them permanently integrated into their health plans (Vickers 48).

Despite beneficial symptoms, HT is a very subjective and sometimes an unquantifiable discipline which can result in little to no observable effects. This is due in part to the limited scope of studies from Healing Touch's relatively new foundation. Measurement of connectivity to self is also difficult to ascertain because many factors may or may not have an effect on a person's overall mood (Wardell 147). In the same studies of dementia patients, cancer patients, and individuals with chronic pain, there were no adverse or favorable symptoms for some while others reported only some beneficial symptoms (Wardell 148). As energy healing is not an exact science, it has its limitations and complications and thus HT remains a complementary form of treatment.

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HT is usually a beneficial procedure, but for one patient, a treatment was found to be uncomfortable:

Client 8 reported: "Today's experience felt negative... my awareness seemed to keep moving in and out of my body... kept feeling I was just about to touch a real spiritual point, but never quite made it." Client 8's practitioner said, 'I know she was not finished- that I needed to work longer but our time was up.' The practitioner was referring to the time constraint of the experimental protocol. In light of such data, there may be implications against rigid adherence to the time constraints of an experimental protocol for future research. (Eschiti 13)

In a psychiatric setting, other precautions need to be taken. Even though HT is non invasive and therapeutic, psychiatric patients need to have a clear understanding of what will go on in a session. Reality and touching can often be skewed as inappropriate to a patient that requires psychiatric help. Practitioners should "have at least some knowledge of the psychiatric disorders" that affect the people they are healing (Vickers 49). Permission to touch is also essential for any patient, but especially important for different genders of practitioner/patient relationships and patients that have a history of abuse (Vickers 49). Skepticism also confronts HT as pilot hospital programs seek to take flight. "Many advanced practice nurses are doubtful" of the effectiveness and life value of HT and are therefore "hesitant to utilize them in their own practice" (Vickers 46). Even though studies show increased quality of life for almost all participants, "no sincere effort is being made to incorporate HT" into treatment plans (Vickers 46).

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On a quiet street in San Diego there is a house which boasts no specialty from the outside. Its color is in uniform with the other houses, the landscape is maintained and there are brick plated stairs leading up to the doorway. Yet upon gazing briefly into the window, the house transports you to a feeling of wellness and peace. After knocking on the door, a woman will open it and welcome you into her home. Pictures of sea life line the walls and sand and shells are placed strategically as if you were at a day at the beach. Suzanne Weeks' warm personality fills up the whole room as you sit down in the entryway. Even though her house is immaculate and looks like a picture in a catalog, it is still warm and inviting. A water fountain trickles in the backyard and the serenity of the overall place puts one's mind at ease. In the entry room is a table lined with a myriad of books about healing and products for sale that Weeks' uses and endorses. From the outside, one would not know about the healing and the sense of connectivity that takes place inside this home. Everything looks like a typical suburban house. However, there is a table in the foyer that is not commonly seen in a typical home. This table is the platform that Weeks' uses to perform Healing Touch therapy on her clients.

Suzanne Weeks started the process of becoming a certified HT practitioner when she attended a level one HT class for her own benefit. HT is a continuation of nursing

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programs designed to enhance a nurse's connectivity to the patient. Weeks' comments that "at first it was interesting stuff, energy healing helps people while helping you, and from there this opened the door to more than just an interest" (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009). At first she admits to being skeptical, but even in the first class she had an "eye opening experience" (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009). A group of practitioners walked around the room, doing quick "scans" of the student's bodies. Two separate people who Weeks' had met only in that class time scanned her body and reported a "prickly and warm sensation above the left shoulder." After the initial shock of this observation Weeks' revealed that she "had a tetanus shot in that same shoulder" the previous day (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009). With this small experience, Weeks' own interest was hooked. It took Weeks eighteen months to become certified even though it could take "some people 6 or 7 years to become certified." Through rigorous case studies, first hand practice and mentorship with different nurses she became a certified HT therapist. She recalls the first time she helped someone:

I was at a sort of fair with lots of different people. An elderly lady who couldn't have been a day younger than 80 sat down at my station and told me she had a headache. After a few minutes of Healing Touch, I asked her how her headache was and she replied it was completely gone. She later introduced me to her husband and talked about the help I had given her. (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009).

Now Weeks' sees a variety of people ranging from cancer patients, teenagers, children,

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and people undergoing life changes. She feels that Healing Touch therapy provides all her patients a way to “stay in tune with the body and to not neglect what it says to you” (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009). She even practices HT on herself, alleviating headaches in an equal or shorter time that “medicine would do,” adding that “if there are options other than popping a pill every time something hurts, why not try it?” (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009). This attitude that a person’s pain can be managed by alternative methods is the reason why she has such a diverse client base. Especially for patients undergoing chemotherapy and radiation, HT is especially important in that it is non invasive and is an alternative approach to an otherwise medicine ridden way of life.

The etiology of diseases and pain in HT is explained through the concept of a balanced person. Connections of emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual aspects are needed in order to maintain balance, and therefore health. Before she took the Healing Touch classes, Weeks stated that “I thought health meant cardio and running, staying fit and eating right...Now I realize that the four aspects of a person can just as easily determine if they feel ill or upset” (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009). She further reveals that the use of chakras can help her determine where a patient is “blocked or stuck.” A chakra she explains is “one of many points on the body that symbolize an area that is associated with different parts of a person’s life” (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009). For example,

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she explains that “if you have a fight with your boyfriend or your mother, the chakra in your throat could become stuck as a result of saying the wrong things or neglecting to say what is really on your mind” (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009). When asked if spirituality plays a part in her healing, Weeks replied that “spirituality means that you are connected to something greater than yourself... Whether that means a God or a doorknob is not up to me... People who are disassociated from any sort of spirituality are missing a crucial element in their lives, and is often a cause of some of the sickness they are feeling” (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009). Weeks uses a pendulum as a diagnostic tool in her practice to ascertain what the nature of the problem is. The pendulum serves as a kind of X-Ray from which she puts over a person’s chakras and can diagnose a potential problem in a person’s body. In addition to the clockwise and counterclockwise motions, “a pendulum can swing diagonally and the speed and circumference of the circles are all indicators of a person’s health over that chakra.” Her hands are perhaps her greatest diagnostic tool. Using light touches over joints, and hands over but not touching sensitive areas of the body, she uses “over 50 different techniques” in order to “relieve stuckness, stress, anxiety, and to reduce fatigue and the need for medication” (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009).

In one notable case, Weeks saw a woman who had been raped and impregnated

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by her attacker. Even after she raised the child to 19 years old, she had pain in her abdomen that could not be explained by numerous “MRI’s, scans, medical workups, or studies.” Weeks worked with her and after “four or five sessions” the woman was completely free of her pain. The assault had left an imbalance in the woman’s abdomen where she had been “storing and stacking emotions that resulted in a somatic illness” (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009). According to Weeks, clients often have life changing experiences after receiving treatment. One woman made a complete career change after one session, claiming Weeks had helped her “realize what she was doing was not what she wanted to be doing.” In regards to the biofield of a person, Weeks remarks “a person’s aura can be felt by trained practitioners and very rarely I have seen the aura of a person. For me, the aura of a smoker is dense, and the energy field of someone who is under stress would be taut almost like a guitar string.”

A typical treatment can last for almost 2 hours while standard treatments are approximately an hour long. The amount of time and techniques used is individualistic to the problems and circumstances of the patient. A preliminary set of questions is asked before receiving a service, and patients are asked to rate a variety of life aspects on a scale of 0-10. Typically, answers are on the low scale at the start of treatment, and gradually get higher as more sessions and greater calmness is achieved. Weeks adds

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that “the most satisfying reaction is to see someone in the stages of grief, and to take them from a 0 on the scale to an 8 or 9” (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009). After these questions, the patient lies down and the variety of techniques is used to ameliorate their situation. According to Weeks, common feelings are “feelings of warmth over an area, and a deeper sense of relaxation. There is no talk therapy during the sessions, and only instrumental music is played in order to enhance the calmness of the session. She refrains from using aromatherapy and even uses non-perfumed shampoo and wears no fragrances. When asked why aromas were adverse to her treatments, she replied that “certain smells can stimulate memories and feelings that are not part of the session and hinder overall progress.” She further adds that “I feel like an equal to my patients, not as superior because in helping them I am also helping myself” (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009).

I was also fortunate enough to be the subject of a brief period of her healing. I sat in a chair and began to breathe deeply at Weeks’ instruction. She then began to run her hands above my body and I immediately had a warm sensation near my right ear, similar to what she had told me about. After another minute, I had an overall relaxation feeling and I uncrossed my legs and felt completely at ease. I was amazed at how only a few minutes of HT took away the stress and anxiety I had been accumulating in my personal life. After she ended my mini treatment, she was not surprised to hear my

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reaction and commented that “people who are skeptical of this healing modality need only to try it in order to gain a better understanding of what I do” (Weeks, Suzanne, 2009).

Suzanne Weeks is a person who is incredibly in touch with her senses and her patients needs. She strives to make all people balanced and connected to the greater cosmos. Her world view and practice symbolize a growing respect for holistic treatments and the belief that healing extends beyond the body. Western medicine must incorporate the concepts in order to create a more comprehensive system that will better connect healers with the healed. Using the Western medical model with HT and other alternative healing modalities will ultimately create a better mind, body, and spirit for all treated. The soothing effects of HT will continue to provide a foundation for this growing discipline and as more and more people learn the practice of HT, people like Suzanne Weeks can restore the balance in everyday life.

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