

A survey of philosophical barriers to research in chiropractic†

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Several epistemological fallacies and theological concepts have been implicated as counter-productive to clinical research, since they seemingly provide an alternative to objective study of chiropractic clinical procedures, or propose objectively untestable constructs. Antiscientific bases for chiropractic claims include founding authority, divine inspiration, deduction from the "immutable laws of biology", and private, uncontrolled empiricism. The teleologic proposition of an intelligent spiritual entity (Innate Intelligence), supposedly the source and explanation of beneficial effects of doctors' interventions, places many chiropractic theories of spinal manipulation/adjustment beyond the realm of science, and serves to alienate chiropractic from the scientific community.

In this project nine philosophical works in chiropractic were surveyed (e.g., those of Barge, Harper, Homewood, Janse, B.J. and D.D. Palmer, Stephenson, Strang, Watkins) to evaluate the pervasiveness of these antiscientific notions in the chiropractic literature. Of the nine philosophers of chiropractic reviewed here, all but two included at least one antiscientific construct. Widespread comparative analyses of chiropractic philosophies are recommended as a means of promoting a more critical, scientific attitude and, thereby increased clinical research activity in chiropractic. (JCCA 1989; 33(4):184-186)

KEY WORDS: chiropractic, manipulation, philosophy.

A variety of factors have been suggested¹ to explain the lack of extensive research in chiropractic, including poverty, isolation of the colleges from mainstream academia¹, persecution by organized medicine², and the perpetuation of several antiscientific principles³. Chief among the philosophical barriers³ to clinical research development are several epistemological notions which suggest "we already know chiropractic works":

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De nombreuses faussetés épistémologiques et concepts théologiques ont été mis en cause comme contre-productifs vis-à-vis la recherche clinique, puisqu'ils fournissent apparemment une alternative à l'étude objective des procédures cliniques chiropractiques ou proposent des notions impossibles à mettre à l'épreuve de façon objective. Les bases non scientifiques pour les prétentions chiropractiques comprennent l'autorité fondatrice, l'inspiration divine, la déduction à partir "des lois immuables de la biologie" et l'empirisme privé et sans contrôle. La proposition téléologique d'une entité spirituelle intelligente (intelligence innée), la source et l'explication des effets soit-disant bénéfiques des interventions du médecin, place plusieurs théories chiropractiques au sujet de la manipulation/redressement de la colonne vertébrale au-delà du domaine de la science et sert à éloigner la communauté chiropractique de la communauté scientifique.

Dans ce projet, neuf travaux philosophiques en chiropractique ont été scrutés (e.g., ceux de Barge, Harper, Homewood, Janse, B.J. et D.D. Palmer, Stephenson, Strang, Watkins) pour évaluer la puissance de pénétration de ces notions non scientifiques dans la littérature chiropractique. Des neuf philosophes de la chiropractique étudiés ici, tous sauf deux incluaient au moins une notion non scientifique. Des analyses comparatives très étendues des philosophies chiropractiques sont recommandées comme moyen de promouvoir une attitude critique plus scientifique et, en conséquence, une activité de recherche clinique accrue par les chiropracticiens. (JCCA 1989; 33(4):184-186)

MOTS CLÉS: chiropratique, manipulation, philosophie.

a) because God (through Innate Intelligence) has revealed this, b) because chiropractic methods may be deduced from the "immutable laws of biology"⁴, and c) because the clinical effectiveness of the chiropractic healing art is amply supported by the uncontrolled, private experience of chiropractors. Relatedly, the proposition of a spiritual entity to explain the effects of chiropractic care, and the perpetuation of the Founder's (and/or the Developer's) authority as a basis for orthodoxy in chiropractic theory, further distances chiropractors from the critical self-examination and interdisciplinary dialogue that a vigorous, self-perpetuating clinical research enterprise requires. Unfortunately, the antiscientific character and prevalence of these notions does not seem widely appreciated.

In order to evaluate the pervasiveness of antiscientific principles of chiropractic the works of 9 chiropractic philosophers were surveyed, and the presence/absence of 5 antiscientific concepts was noted for each author. It was expected that philosophers of chiropractic would vary in the number of antiscientific notions each embraced.

Materials and methods

The selection of philosophical works was arbitrary, and based on the author's judgement of the reknown and/or significance of the book or booklet. Chosen for review were Barge's "Life without fear"⁵, Harper's "Anything can cause anything"⁶, Homewood's "Neurodynamics of the vertebral subluxation"⁷, Janse's "Principles and practice of chiropractic"⁸, B.J. Palmer's "The subluxation specific—the adjustment specific"⁹, D.D. Palmer's "The chiropractor's adjuster"⁴, Stephenson's "Chiropractic textbook"¹⁰, Strang's "Essential principles of chiropractic"¹¹, and Watkins' "The basic principles of chiropractic government"¹². While the choice of philosophical works was arbitrary, the sample spans 8 decades of chiropractic literature, and includes the works of "straights" and "mixers". All of these works are available at most chiropractic college libraries.

Five antiscientific ideas were defined as follows:

Spiritual/vitalistic constructs were noted when belief in an intelligent, spiritual force was indicated (e.g., Innate Intelligence, Universal Intelligence).

Divine/Spiritual Inspiration was noted when a philosopher attributed his written work to Innate or Universal Intelligence or other mystical source.

Fixed/Founding Authority was identified when a philosopher suggested that a method, theory or principle must be accepted because it represents the belief of the founder (D.D. Palmer) or the Developer (B.J. Palmer), and/or cannot be changed.

Rational/Deductive Authority was recorded when a philosopher indicated that basic science rationales provide ample scientific evidence of the value of chiropractic care.

Private and/or Uncontrolled Empiricism was noted when a philosopher suggested that any or all chiropractic theories or methods have been adequately validated by the non-experimental and/or unpublished experience of chiropractors.

The presence or absence (or refutation) of each of these 5 beliefs was determined in each of the 9 philosophical works.

Results

The number of antiscientific concepts per philosopher ranged from 5 (D.D. and B.J. Palmer) to none (Janse, Watkins) (see Table 1). In two cases (Harper re: fixed/founding authority, and Homewood re: Innate Intelligence), this reviewer remained uncertain about these philosophers' views despite repeated readings.

Discussion

The chiropractic philosophers sampled here varied widely in their inclusion of constructs and epistemologies which are incompatible with scientific investigation. The writings of Barge⁵ and the Palmers^{4,9} clustered at one end of the index, and might be characterized as "Palmer fundamentalism". Similarly, the works of Janse⁸ and Watkins¹² clustered at the zero point, and in this author's opinion, may be considered "philosophies of the science of chiropractic". The middle of this continuum includes the works of Stephenson¹⁰, Harper⁶, Strang¹¹ and Homewood⁷, who varied in their acknowledgement of a deity, their claim to fixed or founding authority and their willingness to accept deductive "proof" of chiropractic theory and effectiveness. However, this middle ground is united in its acceptance of private and/or uncontrolled experience as substantiation of chiropractic principles and procedures, and none of these authors claimed divine or spiritual inspiration.

Table 1 Antiscientific concepts in chiropractic philosophies

Author/Date	Spiritual/ Vitalistic Constructs	Divine or Spiritual Inspiration	Fixed/ Founding Authority	Rational/ Deductive	Private and/or Uncontrolled Empiricism	Global Index
BJ Palmer, 1934	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5
DD Palmer, 1910	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5
FH Barge, 1987	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5
RW Stephenson, 1927/48	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	4
WD Harper, 1964/66	Yes	No	No?	Yes	Yes	3 or 4
VV Strang, 1984	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	3
AE Homewood, 1962/77	No?	No	No	No	Yes	1 or 2
JJ Janse, 1976	No	No	No	No	No	0
CO Watkins, 1944	No	No	No	No	No	0

?: Reviewer was unable to determine author's viewpoint

Obviously, this glimpse at the antiscientific content of chiropractic philosophies is limited by the small number of texts reviewed. However, since many of these works are among the most well-known in the profession, it seems reasonable to suppose that many if not most DCs have been exposed to the anti-research views sampled here. Additionally, this review contradicts the idea of agreement on fundamental principles in chiropractic. It cannot be said that there is only one philosophy of chiropractic.

The epistemological fallacies accepted by many chiropractic philosophers are of more than academic importance. The profession's acceptance of spiritual constructs^{13,14}, divine inspiration, untested deduction, and private empiricism has traditionally undercut the motivation necessary for a vigorous clinical research program, and alienates the profession from the scientific community. Those chiropractors who "already know chiropractic works" because God has revealed this, or because D.D. or B.J. said so, or because "it just makes sense", or because personal experience or anecdote has confirmed it, are unlikely to conduct nor critically evaluate much clinical research, since they have their answers before the research questions are asked. Yet these antiscientific ways of "knowing" are still actively propagated at several chiropractic colleges and many seminars throughout the profession. Rather than a vigorous, profession-wide program to evaluate which chiropractic methods will help which patients with which health problems under which circumstances, many doctors continue to assure one another that "we know it works, it gets results, and that's what counts". The need to critically test¹⁵ and experimentally validate/invalidate chiropractic methods is not universally agreed to.

The works of Janse⁸ and Watkins¹² provide alternatives to the limited epistemologies reviewed here. While asserting the importance of the basic science foundations of chiropractic and the role of private clinical experience in clinical decision-making, these authors insist upon the need to experimentally test the clinical value of the chiropractic art. And, though each acknowledges the mystery and complexity of the body's homeostatic and self-repair processes, neither offers any spiritual explanations of these phenomena. These philosophers of chiropractic seek to encourage critical investigations of the value to patients of chiropractic methods. For Janse and Watkins, authority in chiropractic theory and technique derives from clinical research data.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this brief review of the various epistemologies in the chiropractic literature may help to stimulate more wide-

spread critical analyses of philosophy by chiropractors. Greater appreciation of the differences among chiropractic perspectives could encourage a more skeptical, scientific attitude among doctors, and thereby motivate greater research efforts. In view of growing political and economic pressures to document the value of its clinical services, the profession's future autonomy may well depend upon chiropractors' willingness to carefully reexamine its diverse philosophical heritage.

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