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Journal of Acupuncture and Meridian Studies

journal homepage: www.jams-kpi.com

PERSPECTIVE



Perception of Therapeutic Qi, a Nonmechanical, Nonpsychological Factor in Acupuncture That Originates from the Therapist

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Available online 16 December 2014

Received: Jun 8, 2014
Revised: Nov 10, 2014
Accepted: Nov 12, 2014

KEYWORDS

acupuncture;
neiguan;
neurobiological
mechanism;
single blind

Abstract

So far, most research attempts to explain the mechanism of the action of acupuncture have focused mostly on mechanically-triggered active factors and have produced inconclusive findings. In this study, we investigate whether acupuncture might also involve nonmechanical, nonpsychological active factors originating in the therapist. In 30 individuals, an acupuncture needle was inserted in the acupoint PC6 using a special device without touching the needle. A second device was used to fix the needle rigidly in place, excluding any mechanical transmission of movement from the handle to the needle's tip. Each participant was exposed in random order to a control and a stimulation phase. During the stimulation phase, the free needle's end was held by the therapist to allow the transmission of Qi; during the control phase, it was left untouched. Participants' subjective sensations during the stimulation phase and the control phase were recorded using a questionnaire. Twenty-two of 28 (79%; $p = 0.003$) test

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participants believed that they had received stimulation when it had actually been performed, and 26 (93%; $p < 0.001$) sensed differences between the two experimental phases. Thus, participants were able to sense the transmission of *therapeutic Qi* in the absence of mechanical or psychological factors.

1. Introduction

The specific effectiveness of acupuncture in the treatment of certain disorders has been demonstrated in clinical trials, meta-analyses, and reviews conforming to the Cochrane criteria [1–4]. To date, research has focused on the mechanism of action for acupuncture [5–15], but no compelling explanations have been given to account for the efficacy of acupuncture [16]. Most research has been dedicated to neurological [5,6], molecular [7–11], and mechanical [12–15] processes that may be mechanically triggered by needling treatment. However, according to the understanding of Chinese medicine, the effectiveness of acupuncture resides in Qi, a term or concept that has no equivalent in western culture [17,18]. The fact that modern needle stimulation, which requires no real participation from the therapist, is different from traditional acupuncture therapy has also been discussed [19]. Patients report different sensations when an acupuncture needle is inserted and manipulated. These sensations are subsumed and have been researched under the term De Qi [18].

De Qi sensations have also been described discriminately by therapists [20]. According to the Ling Shu [21], the

foremost classic on acupuncture in the literature of Chinese medicine, trained acupuncturists control the flow of Qi through their fingertips. In Chinese medicine, Qi is neither thought of as a material nor is its effectiveness thought of as residing in mechanical, active factors; nevertheless, to date, almost no research has addressed the nonmaterial aspects originating in the therapist.

The purpose of this study was, therefore, to investigate whether this form of Qi—hypothetically referred to here as therapeutic Qi—can be sensed by test participants when psychological and mechanical influences are ruled out or controlled. To this end, we have recently introduced two novel devices. One allows the insertion of an acupuncture needle without touching it; the other holds the needle in place and prevents transmission of movements from the handle to the tip of the needle [22].

2. Materials and methods

This experimental, controlled, randomized, single-blinded, two-phase crossover study included 30 test participants.

As shown in Fig. 1, participants lay on a treatment table and extended their right lower arm past a screen, placing it

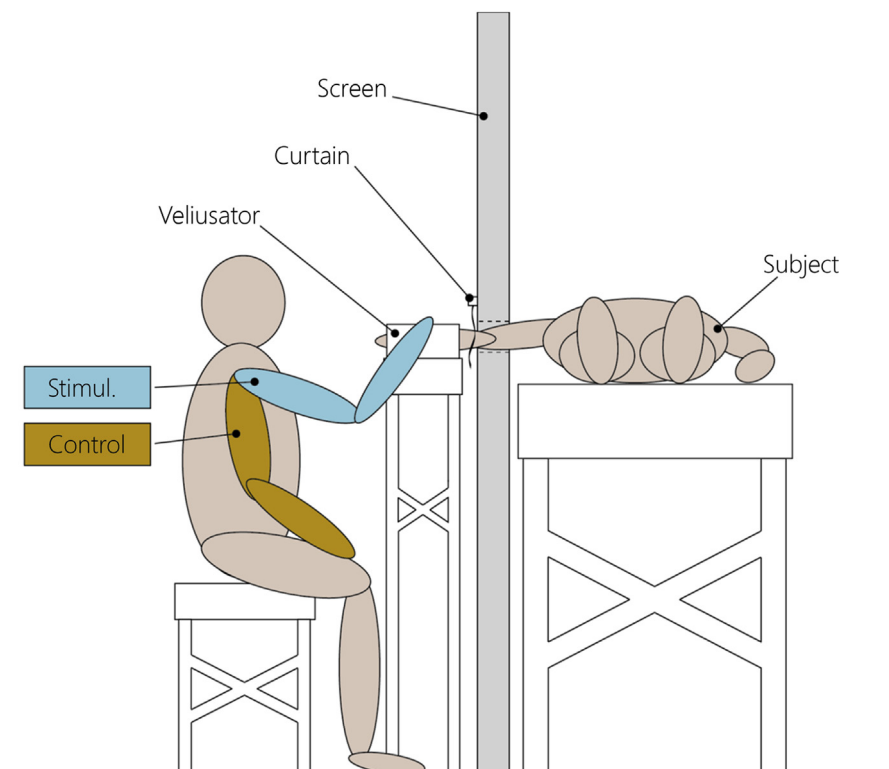


Figure 1 The experimental setup.

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