

Considering Meta-Analysis, Meaning, and Metaphor: A Systematic Review and Critical Examination of “Third Wave” Cognitive and Behavioral Therapies

Sona Dimidjian

Joanna J. Arch

Rebecca L. Schneider

University of Colorado Boulder

Philip Desormeau

University of Toronto Scarborough

Jennifer N. Felder

University of California, San Francisco

Zindel V. Segal

University of Toronto Scarborough

In this review, we examine common usage of the term “third wave” in the scientific literature, systematically review published meta-analyses of identified “third wave” therapies, and consider the implications and options for the use of “third wave” as a metaphor to describe the nature of and relationships among cognitive and behavioral therapies. We demonstrate that the “third wave” term has grown in its use over time, that it is commonly linked with specific therapies, and that the majority of such therapies have amassed a compelling evidence base attesting to their clinical and public health value. We also consider the extent to which the “third wave” designation is an effective guide for the future, and we encourage scientific inquiry and self-reflection among those concerned with cognitive and behavioral therapies and the scientific basis of psychotherapy more broadly.

Address correspondence to Sona Dimidjian, Ph.D., Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of Colorado Boulder, 345 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0345; e-mail: sona.dimidjian@colorado.edu.

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In 2004, A GROUP OF PSYCHOTHERAPY APPROACHES was described for the first time as “third wave” therapies in the English language scholarly literature (Hayes, 2004). This designation suggested that the field of psychotherapy was undergoing an important evolution of cognitive and behavioral therapies. This “third wave” was situated in reference to the shift in the late 1960s and 1970s from purely behavioral approaches to those that integrated or privileged cognitive approaches. The “third wave” designation elicited both enthusiasm and controversy. Enthusiasts heralded the importance of these approaches to alleviating human suffering and underscored the ways in which these approaches represented innovations in psychotherapy. Skeptics questioned whether the approaches were really all that different from the “second wave” cognitive behavioral therapies (or, for that matter, whether they were all that similar to one another) and whether they had sufficient empirical evidence to warrant such fanfare.

Over a decade has passed since that first designation, providing an opportunity to reflect on three key questions: What are “third wave” therapies? To what extent have “third wave” therapies provided significant public health benefit? What is the future of “third wave” therapies? We engage these questions in three ways. First, we examine the meaning of the term “third wave” by tracking its use in the scientific literature over the past decade to situate our consideration in an historical context. Second, we systematically review the current meta-analytic literature on specific treatments that have been identified most frequently in the literature as “third wave,” examining effect sizes that contrast pre-post change within treatments and between-group contrasts when available. Third, we consider the conceptual status of the category of “third wave,” both as a metaphor and as a guide to the emerging scientific questions that must be answered to help advance the field towards maximum public health impact.

Considering Meaning: The Historical Status of Common Usage of “Third Wave” in the Scientific Literature

The meaning of the “third wave” term is determined, at least in part, by common usage patterns. To examine the meaning of the “third wave” designation, we examined the use of the term in the scientific literature in an historical context. We searched the databases PsycINFO and PubMed using the search term combination “third wave AND therapy.” This search returned 145 results in PsycINFO and 124 results in PubMed, of which 30 were duplicates, yielding a total of 239 scholarly articles. We reviewed the title, abstract, and subject/keywords of these articles. All studies that referenced cognitive and behavioral therapies by using the term “third wave” were retained, and those using the term “third wave” in a different context (e.g., third wave feminism, third wave of a longitudinal study) were excluded, as were book reviews. Using these criteria, we identified 140 unique articles published between 2003 and 2015.

The first reference to “third wave” therapy identified in the English language scholarly literature was in the seminal paper by Hayes (2004) in *Behavior Therapy*; although an earlier paper on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy was published in a Dutch journal (Hayes, Masuda, & De Mey, 2003). Although substantial work developing and testing individual “third wave” therapies had been ongoing prior to 2004, it was not until that time that these therapies were linked under the broader umbrella of the “third wave” term. We sought to address the question of what the designation of

“third wave” means, in part, by examining what is and is not identified as a “third wave” therapy based on these references in the scholarly literature. Hayes (2004) defined the unifying features of “third wave” interventions as follows: “No one factor unites these new methods, but all have ventured into areas traditionally reserved for the less empirical wings of clinical intervention and analysis, emphasizing such issues as acceptance, mindfulness, cognitive defusion, dialectics, values, spirituality, and relationship. Their methods are often more experiential than didactic; their underlying philosophies are more contextualistic than mechanistic” (p. 640). This original definition offered by Hayes (2004) also specifically cited the following approaches as examples of “third wave” therapies: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1993), Functional Analytic Psychotherapy (FAP; Kohlenberg & Tsai, 1991), Integrative Behavioral Couples Therapy (IBCT; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996), and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002), among several others. We reviewed each article ($N = 140$) to identify which specific approaches were classified as “third wave” based on the authors’ designation.

Many among the total pool of articles did not explicitly refer to a specific approach as “third wave” and spoke more generally of the category of “third wave” ($N = 47$); however, of those that did ($N = 93$), a total of 17 specific approaches were classified in the literature as “third wave.” The distribution of the number of times a specific approach was referenced as “third wave” in the literature is illustrated in Figure 1. The third wave category has been linked clearly with specific treatment approaches. Among those approaches characterized as “third wave” at least 10 times, ACT was most frequently cited, followed by DBT, MBCT, FAP, and BA. A range of other therapies were referenced less often and included the following approaches (number of times identified as “third wave” indicated in parentheses):

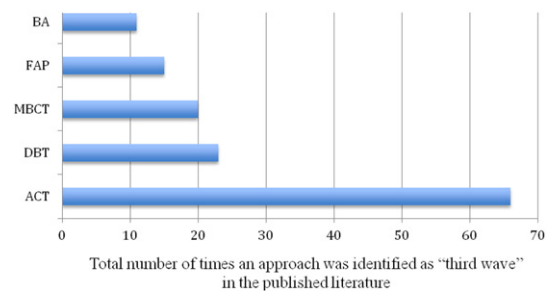


FIGURE 1 Therapeutic approaches most frequently characterized as “third wave” in the scientific literature.

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