



Rethinking Communication and Consciousness: Lessons from The
Telepathy Tapes Podcast

Marina Weiler , Marjorie Woollacott

PII: S1550-8307(25)00162-4
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2025.103271>
Reference: JSCH 103271

To appear in: *EXPLORE*

Received date: 6 October 2025
Accepted date: 16 October 2025

Please cite this article as: Marina Weiler , Marjorie Woollacott , Rethinking Communication and Consciousness: Lessons from The Telepathy Tapes Podcast, *EXPLORE* (2025), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2025.103271>

This is a PDF file of an article that has undergone enhancements after acceptance, such as the addition of a cover page and metadata, and formatting for readability, but it is not yet the definitive version of record. This version will undergo additional copyediting, typesetting and review before it is published in its final form, but we are providing this version to give early visibility of the article. Please note that, during the production process, errors may be discovered which could affect the content, and all legal disclaimers that apply to the journal pertain.

© 2025 Elsevier Inc. All rights are reserved, including those for text and data mining, AI training, and similar technologies.

Rethinking Communication and Consciousness: Lessons from *The Telepathy Tapes* PodcastMarina Weiler^{1*} & Marjorie Woollacott²¹ Department of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences, University of Virginia, USA² Institute of Neuroscience, University of Oregon, USA**Corresponding author:**

Marina Weiler

zzs2jq@uvahealth.org

ABSTRACT

In late 2024, *The Telepathy Tapes* podcast ignited global debate by spotlighting nonspeaking autistic individuals who appeared to convey knowledge beyond ordinary sensory channels. For some, the series offered overdue recognition of nonspeakers' intelligence and agency; for others, it represented a revival of the discredited practice of Facilitated Communication. This controversy reflects deeper cultural and scientific assumptions: nonspeakers have long been misclassified as profoundly intellectually disabled, with their lack of speech equated with a lack of thought. Yet emerging evidence increasingly challenges this deficit model, with recent empirical findings supporting authorship and intentionality. At the same time, anecdotal reports of anomalous—potentially telepathic—communication, though contentious, warrant consideration in light of prior parapsychological research. We contend that *The Telepathy Tapes* marks a cultural turning point, compelling a reassessment of entrenched scientific frameworks and ethical stances toward nonspeakers. We advocate that the podcast should be considered a filmmaker's curious exploration of the phenomenon, which will engender the curiosity of scientists to move forward with carefully controlled experiments. Moving forward, a less stigmatized and more open-minded approach is

needed—one that recognizes carefully documented anecdotes as valuable starting points for rigorous empirical inquiry.

Journal Pre-proof

Introduction: A Cultural Turning Point

In late 2024, a podcast series titled *The Telepathy Tapes* captured the public imagination, rapidly climbing to the top of major podcast charts worldwide. The series chronicled the experiences of nonspeaking autistic individuals who, according to their families and therapists, demonstrated the ability to communicate thoughts and perceptions beyond ordinary sensory channels. The episodes highlighted striking cases in which nonspeakers appeared to spell or type information that had not been presented to them directly, but was instead known only to another person in the room. The podcast presented systematic attempts—albeit outside of traditional academic experimental designs—to test whether such communication could be verified under controlled conditions. In many instances, accuracy rates exceeded chance expectations, with some nonspeakers producing correct sequences repeatedly across sessions.

For supporters, *The Telepathy Tapes* provided long-overdue recognition that nonspeaking individuals may possess both linguistic sophistication and anomalous capacities that mainstream science has yet to explain. For critics, the project evoked the specter of “facilitator influence” long associated with the controversy over Facilitated Communication (FC). Yet regardless of one’s position, the sheer visibility of the podcast reignited a global debate about intelligence, agency, and communication in autism, while also forcing uncomfortable questions about whether existing scientific frameworks are adequate to account for the reported phenomena.

Autism, Intellectual Disability, and the Denial of Agency

For much of the 20th century, autism was conflated with what was then called “*mental retardation*.” Early diagnostic frameworks and institutional practices presumed that individuals who did not use spoken language lacked both intelligence and agency. The inability to produce speech was interpreted as evidence of a global cognitive deficit rather than a motor or communication barrier.

This assumption continues to shape mainstream clinical practice. Even today, many mental health professionals classify nonspeaking autistic individuals as having severe to profound intellectual disability, often without conducting assessments that accommodate their motor and sensory differences (Evans, 2013). Standard IQ tests, which rely heavily on verbal or motor responses, systematically underestimate their abilities. (Courchesne, Meilleur, Poulin-Lord, Dawson, & Soulières, 2015) As a result, nonspeakers are frequently described as incapable of abstract thought, lacking self-awareness, and unable to understand spoken language (Bertilsson Rosqvist, Hultman, & Hallqvist, 2023).

Such views effectively strip nonspeaking autistic individuals of agency. They are often spoken *about* rather than *with*, treated as passive recipients of care rather than participants in their own lives. Parents and advocates repeatedly report encountering professionals who insist that nonspeakers “do not know what is being said to them” or “cannot comprehend language.” The

persistence of this deficit-based model reflects a larger cultural and scientific inertia: an enduring reluctance to presume competence in populations who do not conform to conventional forms of communication.

Communication approaches and other controversies surrounding *The Telepathy Tapes*

Although nonspeaking autistic individuals were long dismissed as “mentally retarded” and presumed incapable of understanding others, the past few decades have seen the development of alternative communication methods designed to reveal their latent abilities and provide them with a voice. Among these, Facilitated Communication (FC) and Spelling to Communicate (S2C) represent two stages in an ongoing effort to recognize that many nonspeaking autistic individuals may be far more cognitively capable than historically assumed.

FC emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, originally developed by Australian educator Rosemary Crossley at the St. Nicholas Hospital in Melbourne. Crossley worked with individuals with cerebral palsy and severe motor challenges, and she proposed that physical support—such as holding a person’s hand, wrist, or arm—could stabilize motor movements and enable them to point to letters or type messages. FC was introduced to the United States in the late 1980s and gained rapid popularity in the early 1990s, particularly through the efforts of psychologist Douglas Biklen at Syracuse University.

S2C represents a later evolution of these ideas. Developed in the 2010s by Elizabeth Vosseller, a speech-language pathologist in Virginia, S2C reframes FC not as a language technique but as a form of motor training. In S2C, facilitators hold a letterboard while prompting nonspeaking individuals to point to letters. Unlike early FC, S2C emphasizes the gradual fading of physical support and the development of purposeful motor control.

Much of the criticism surrounding the podcast stems from controversies over FC, with critics dismissing it as “already debunked”. Early controlled studies in the 1990s suggested that facilitators, consciously or unconsciously, influenced the outputs: in many cases, nonspeakers spelled information available only to the facilitator, not to themselves (Eberlin, McConnachie, Ibel, & Volpe, 1993; Montee, Miltenberger, & Wittrock, 1995). These findings led professional organizations such as the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) to not support using FC (American Speech-Language-Hearing). The controversy left a lasting stigma that still shapes perceptions today.

In that sense, it is important to clarify a crucial point that critics of the podcast tend to overlook: a substantial proportion of the individuals featured can type independently on a keyboard or with minimal assistance. Notably, nine individuals typed directly into an iPad or QWERTY keyboard entirely on their own, without any physical support whatsoever. Twelve participants, trained in S2C, spelled independently on a stencil or laminated letterboard without touch assistance. One participant was still in the early stages of letterboard use and required minimal physical

support—specifically, a light touch of one finger on the body to regulate movement. Remarkably, none of the participants relied on FC. In these cases, the possibility of facilitator influence or ideomotor response—the core critique used to dismiss the podcast’s findings—can reasonably be ruled out, if approached with less passion and dogmatism.

Additionally, a growing body of empirical research has challenged the longstanding consensus that such communication methods lack validity (Schlosser & Prabhu, 2024). Eye-tracking studies using letterboards have shown that nonspeaking autistic individuals consistently fixate on target letters before pointing, providing strong evidence of intentional selection rather than passive guidance (Jaswal, Wayne, & Golino, 2020). In addition, although these methods still face considerable mainstream criticism, they remain strongly supported by families and nonspeakers themselves (Bonker & Breen, 2011; Cullen & Ricker, 2016; Handley & Handley, 2021; Peña, 2019). Together, these converging lines of evidence underscore the authenticity of authorship and call for a reassessment of entrenched assumptions about the communicative and cognitive capacities of nonspeaking autistic individuals. This recognition aligns with the principle of *presuming competence*: an ethical stance that shifts the burden of proof from “prove ability” to “assume ability until disproven” (Heyworth, Chan, & Lawson, 2022).

A second line of criticism confronts the most controversial element of *The Telepathy Tapes*: the suggestion that nonspeaking autistic individuals may, at times, demonstrate telepathic ability. For many, this claim is dismissed out of hand as implausible. Yet it is important to recognize that evidence for mind-to-mind interaction has been widely reported in parapsychological research for over a century, with numerous controlled studies suggesting that information transfer beyond the ordinary senses may occur under certain settings (Rabeyron, Evrard, & Massicotte, 2021; Sheldrake, 2014; Sheldrake & Smart, 2003; Sheldrake, Stedall, & Tressoldi, 2025; Stedall & Tressoldi, 2025; Venkatasubramanian et al., 2008) including in populations with psychiatric or developmental conditions. (Bender, 1938; Drake, 1938; Ekblad, 2022).

Reconsidered in this light, some of the earliest “failed” FC studies—where nonspeakers produced information accessible only to the facilitator—need not be interpreted exclusively as artifacts of facilitator influence. Instead, they could possibly represent faint but genuine signals of an anomalous capacity, overlooked because it fell outside accepted paradigms. While current data are far from conclusive, these findings open a provocative possibility: that what mainstream science has long dismissed as error may, in select cases, reflect unexplored channels of human connection. To ignore this possibility altogether risks closing the door on a line of inquiry that, if pursued with rigor, could fundamentally reshape our understanding of communication and consciousness.

Seen from another angle, however, the debate is not only about *what* phenomena are reported but also about *how* they are reported. A third line of criticism centers on the nature of the evidence itself: much of it is anecdotal, collected informally in homes rather than under laboratory conditions, and therefore dismissed as unscientific. Yet history reminds us that anecdotes are not

the end of science, but often its beginning. Many of the most transformative discoveries—in fields as diverse as astronomy, medicine, and psychology—began with the careful documentation of unexpected observations that challenged prevailing assumptions. What distinguished these moments was not their immediate conformity to strict experimental standards, but their ability to highlight phenomena worthy of systematic study. In this light, the testimonies gathered in *The Telepathy Tapes* should not be regarded as definitive proof, but as early data points—signals that warrant rigorous, hypothesis-driven research. To ignore such accounts outright risks silencing potentially meaningful insights and perpetuating blind spots in our scientific understanding of communication and consciousness.

Moving Forward

The debate sparked by *The Telepathy Tapes* highlights a deeper challenge for science: how to balance skepticism with openness when confronted with claims that defy conventional frameworks. The history of FC and S2C reveals how entrenched assumptions about nonspeaking autistic individuals—long dismissed as cognitively deficient—have shaped both research agendas and clinical practice, often to the detriment of those most affected. Yet emerging evidence underscores the need to reassess these assumptions, while anecdotal reports of telepathic phenomena invite exploration rather than derision. They invite curiosity. Moving forward requires a shift in posture: less dogmatism, more methodological innovation, and a willingness to take unconventional questions seriously when the voices of marginalized groups are at stake. By presuming competence, embracing interdisciplinary collaboration, and treating exploratory findings as the seeds of rigorous inquiry, we can create a scientific culture that is both more inclusive and more courageous—one capable of capturing the full range of human communication and consciousness. In the end, the deeper danger is not in mistakenly granting them too much credit, but in dismissing their abilities outright—an error that silences minds, stifles potential, and may prove far more damaging than believing they can communicate and even mind-read when they cannot.

REFERENCES

- American Speech-Language-Hearing, A. Facilitated Communication [Position Statement]. (2018). <https://www.asha.org/policy/PS2018-00352/>. Accessed September 4, 2025.
- Bender, H. (1938). The case of Ilga K.: report of a phenomenon of unusual perception. *The Journal of Parapsychology*, 2(1), 5.
- Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, H., Hultman, L., & Hallqvist, J. (2023). Knowing and accepting oneself: Exploring possibilities of self-awareness among working autistic young adults. *Autism*, 27(5), 1417-1425. doi:10.1177/13623613221137428

- Bonker, E. M., & Breen, V. G. (2011). *I am in here: The journey of a child with autism who cannot speak but finds her voice*: Revell.
- Courchesne, V., Meilleur, A.-A. S., Poulin-Lord, M.-P., Dawson, M., & Soulières, I. (2015). Autistic children at risk of being underestimated: School-based pilot study of a strength-informed assessment. *Molecular autism*, 6, 1-10.
- Cullen, T., & Ricker, C. (2016). *Josiah's Fire: Autism Stole His Words, God Gave Him a Voice*: BroadStreet Publishing.
- Drake, R. M. (1938). An unusual case of extra-sensory perception. *The Journal of Parapsychology*, 2(3), 184.
- Eberlin, M., McConnachie, G., Ibel, S., & Volpe, L. (1993). Facilitated communication: A failure to replicate the phenomenon. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 23(3), 507-530.
- Ekblad, L. (2022). *Telepathy, anomalous experience and the relation to the autism spectrum*. Preprint available in https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363379669_Telepathy_anomalous_experience_and_the_relation_to_the_autism_spectrum.
- Evans, B. (2013). How autism became autism: The radical transformation of a central concept of child development in Britain. *Hist Human Sci*, 26(3), 3-31. doi:10.1177/0952695113484320
- Handley, J. B., & Handley, J. (2021). *Underestimated: An Autism Miracle*: Skyhorse.
- Heyworth, M., Chan, T., & Lawson, W. (2022). Perspective: Presuming autistic communication competence and reframing facilitated communication. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 864991.
- Jaswal, V. K., Wayne, A., & Golino, H. (2020). Eye-tracking reveals agency in assisted autistic communication. *Scientific Reports*, 10(1), 7882. doi:10.1038/s41598-020-64553-9
- Montee, B. B., Miltenberger, R. G., & Wittrock, D. (1995). An experimental analysis of facilitated communication. *Journal of applied behavior analysis*, 28(2), 189-200.
- Peña, E. V. (2019). *Communication Alternatives in Autism: Perspectives on Typing and Spelling Approaches for the Nonspeaking*: McFarland, Incorporated, Publishers.
- Rabeyron, T., Evrard, R., & Massicotte, C. (2021). Psychoanalysis and telepathic processes. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 69(3), 535-571.

- Schlosser, R. W., & Prabhu, A. (2024). Interrogating neurotypical bias in facilitated communication, rapid prompting method, and spelling 2 communicate through a humanistic lens. *Current Developmental Disorders Reports*, 11(1), 41-51.
- Sheldrake, R. (2014). Telepathy in connection with telephone calls, text messages and emails. *Journal of International Society of Life Information Science*, 32(1), 7-15.
- Sheldrake, R., & Smart, P. (2003). Experimental tests for telephone telepathy. *JOURNAL-SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH*, 68, 184-199.
- Sheldrake, R., Stedall, T., & Tressoldi, P. (2025). Telecommunication Telepathy: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Anomalous Experience and Cognition*, 5(1), 47-69.
- Stedall, T., & Tressoldi, P. (2025). Who is calling? An Independent Replication of a Telephone Telepathy Test. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 39(2).
- Venkatasubramanian, G., Jayakumar, P. N., Nagendra, H. R., Nagaraja, D., Deeptha, R., & Gangadhar, B. N. (2008). Investigating paranormal phenomena: Functional brain imaging of telepathy. *Int J Yoga*, 1(2), 66-71. doi:10.4103/0973-6131.43543