

HYPNOSIS: A MATURE VIEW¹

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After seeking the essence of hypnosis for nearly 40 years, I finally synthesized my conclusions in a book chapter (Barber, 1999). In this invited statement I'll summarize the basic points of this new hypnosis synthesis.

I understood the essence of hypnosis when I realized that there are really three dimensions or kinds of hypnosis, each associated with one of the three types of very good hypnotic subjects. One dimension or type of hypnosis is associated with very good hypnotic subjects who have a secret life-long history of fantasizing 'as real as real'. A second type of hypnosis is associated with another group of very good subjects who have a surprising tendency to forget events in their life and also have amnesia for hypnosis. A third type of hypnosis is associated with very good subjects who are neither fantasy-prone nor amnesia-prone but, instead, have positive attitudes, motivations and expectancies towards the hypnotic situation and are thus 'positively set' to think with and flow with the suggestions. The three kinds of hypnosis were distinguished gradually by a series of research projects (extending from the late 1950s to the early 1990s), which I summarized in the recent publication (Barber, 1999). Here, I'll list a few research highlights.

Two large-scale investigations with several thousand hypnotic subjects by Deirdre Barrett (1990, 1996) and by Steven Jay Lynn and Judith Rhue (1986, 1988) confirmed Sheryl Wilson and T.X. Barber's (1981, 1983) discovery that a small group of people (possibly no more than 2–4% of the adult population) have an astonishing history of realistic fantasizing and are very good hypnotic subjects because they experience externally guided hypnosis in essentially the same way as their internally guided 'real as real' daily fantasies. Since early childhood, these very good hypnotic subjects have spent an incredibly large proportion of their time in fantasy-based activities such as pretend-play, make-believe, vivid daydreaming, 'real as real' imaginative re-creation of sexual psychophysiological experiences, and interactions with such entities as imaginary companions, guardian angels and spirits. Now, as adults, they have a closely guarded secret: they still spend much of their time fantasizing and they 'see, hear, feel, smell and experience' what they fantasize.

The second type of very good hypnotic subject was differentiated by Deirdre Barrett (1990, 1996). She discovered that her very good subjects included a large proportion of fantasy-prone individuals and an almost equally large proportion of individuals who were not at all fantasy-prone but instead were amnesia-prone, that is, were characterized by amnesic periods in their daily lives, by amnesia for their childhood, and by amnesia following hypnosis. During hypnosis, these amnesia-prone subjects exhibited an extreme loss of muscle tone. When awakened from hypnosis, they

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seemed confused, struggled to talk, were slow to answer questions, and seemed to have forgotten much or all that occurred. These very good hypnotic subjects also showed much forgetfulness in their lives. Most were amnesic for their life prior to the age of 5 years, and 40% could not remember life events prior to ages 6 to 8. (In startling contrast, all of Barrett's fantasy-prone subjects had vivid memories prior to age 3 and most reported memories prior to age 2.) Many and possibly all of Barrett's amnesia-prone subjects (and none of her fantasy-prone subjects) had been beaten, battered or injured during childhood and had suffered associated psychological abuse and, in many cases, sexual abuse.

Although fantasy-prone and amnesia-prone individuals have played dramatic roles in the history of hypnosis, most individuals rated as very good subjects in modern experiments (typically passing 85% or more of the suggestions on the Barber, Stanford, Harvard, Carleton and/or Creative Imagination Scales) were neither fantasy-prone nor amnesia-prone. Instead, they were very good hypnotic subjects because they had (a) positive attitudes towards the idea of hypnosis, towards the specific test situation and towards the particular hypnotist; (b) positive motivation to perform well on the suggested tasks and to experience those things suggested; (c) positive expectancies that they can be hypnotized and can experience the suggested effects; and (d) a positive set to visualize, think with and not contradict the hypnotist's suggestions. A small number of important investigations in clinical hypnosis, self-hypnosis and stage hypnosis (summarized by Barber, 1999) and numerous investigations in experimental hypnosis (summarized in Barber, 1969, 1970; Sarbin and Coe, 1972; Barber, Spanos and Chaves, 1974; Wagstaff, 1981; Sheehan and McConkey, 1982; Spanos and Chaves, 1989; Baker, 1990) buttressed this picture of the very good hypnotic subject who is positively set to respond maximally in a particular hypnotic situation.

The research mentioned above, which took nearly 40 years to distinguish the three distinct types of very good hypnotic subjects, was corroborated by a recent statistical investigation in which cluster analyses were performed on the hypnotic experiences reported by several hundred subjects (Pekala, 1991; Pekala, Kumar and Marcano, 1995). Pekala's cluster analyses yielded the same three types of very good hypnotic subjects: type 1 resemble fantasy-prone persons whose hypnotic experiences are characterized by vivid imagery and fantasy, and mild-to-moderate alterations in consciousness but not by amnesia; type 2 resemble amnesia-prone persons who, during hypnosis, are characterized by automaticity, apparent loss of self-awareness, seemingly profound alterations in state of consciousness, and post-hypnotic amnesia but not by vivid imagery; type 3 resemble positively set (or 'compliant'), 'highly hypnotizable subjects who respond behaviourally to all or almost all of the Harvard [Group Scale of Hypnotic Susceptibility] items, and yet do not generate the usual phenomenological response to the Harvard', that is, do not experience hypnosis in the same way as the fantasy-prone or amnesia-prone.

This new hypnosis paradigm meets the criteria for a useful scientific paradigm (Kuhn, 1962) in that it unifies conflicting ('trance' versus 'non-trance') views, explains the (three dimensional) nature of hypnosis, explains 'baffling' hypnotic phenomena, provides new methods of research to answer entirely new questions, and radically alters the assumptions, conceptualizations, procedures and aims of hypnosis research.

The new paradigm sees the conflicting schools of hypnosis, both historic and modern (Gauld, 1992), as focusing on different kinds of very good hypnotic subjects and, consequently, as talking about different kinds of hypnosis. One school ('trance',

'state', 'neo-dissociation') focused on the hypnosis of the amnesia-prone subject, while the other school ('non-trance', 'non-state', 'suggestion', 'cognitive-behavioural-social-psychological') focused on the positively set subject, and both schools missed the important fantasy-prone subject. When the three types of hypnosis are clearly distinguished, the conflicting schools disappear into a higher unity, a new paradigm, that harmoniously encompasses the three kinds of hypnosis.

Instead of one undifferentiated, unidimensional hypnosis, we have to now think in terms of three hypnoses: the hypnosis of the fantasy-prone person which involves essentially the same state of consciousness as absorption in realistic fantasy; the hypnosis of the amnesia-prone person which has sleep-like characteristics with apparent automaticity followed by amnesia; and the hypnosis of the positively set person which involves a not particularly uncommon state of consciousness characterized by 'mental relaxation', 'letting go' and 'going with the flow'. Similarly, the new paradigm reconceptualizes autohypnosis in three dimensions: the self-hypnosis of fantasy-prone persons absorbed in their daily fantasies; the self-hypnosis of the amnesia-prone during the 'blank' periods in their life; and the self-hypnosis of the positively set who close their eyes, let go of other concerns, and think with and imagine self-administered suggestions.

The new paradigm asks new questions and opens new lines of research. What life experiences produce the three types of very good hypnotic subjects? How are the special 'talents' of the different types related to the 'classical' hypnotic phenomena and to related phenomena such as the different types of 'trance' associated with fantasy-prone and amnesia-prone shamans (Cardeña, 1996)? What are the different subtypes of fantasy-prone, amnesia-prone and positively set subjects, and how do the different subtypes explain what has not been understood about hypnosis? The preliminary data now available suggest a number of hypotheses related to these questions that can be tested empirically.

Hypothesis 1: There are at least three subtypes of fantasy-prone persons: one subtype developed fantasy talents in association with childhood imaginative activities (such as pretend-play, make-believe, imaginary playmates and exposure to fantasy-stimulating tales or stories); a second subtype developed fantasy talents in learning to escape mentally from an undesirable early life environment; and a third subtype became proficient in fantasizing 'real as real' by engaging in increasingly realistic sexual fantasies based on pleasurable sexual contacts experienced intermittently.

Hypothesis 2: There are at least two subtypes of amnesia-prone subjects: one subtype learned during childhood to escape mentally from abuse by developing an ability to 'block out' (to separate, isolate, repress or dissociate) memories and experiences in a separate ego state or alternate personality; and a second subtype learned during childhood to comply with an adult's desires and have amnesia for the events in response to repeatedly experiencing furtive sexual relations with an adult while (the child was) ostensibly sleeping.

Hypothesis 3: There are at least two subtypes of positively set individuals who are very good hypnotic subjects. One subtype is a highly socialized, empathic, cooperative, friendly person who readily adopts positive attitudes and expectancies in social situations, and is ready to yield to the wishes (or suggestions) of another person. However, most positively set individuals are very good hypnotic subjects not because they are

so highly socialized and so ready to yield to another's wishes but because a proficient hypnotist has removed their misconceptions and fears about hypnosis and maximized their expectations, desires and readiness to relax mentally, shift into a receptive mode and cognitively 'flow with' (think with, imagine, visualize) those things suggested.

The new hypnosis paradigm is multidimensional. It subsumes the three major dimensions outlined above – the dimensions of fantasy-prone, amnesia-prone and positively set subjects – plus three additional dimensions:

- (a) The dimension of the social psychology of the psychological experiment (Orne, 1962), which includes implicit demand characteristics such as implicit social rules, obligations, and mutual roles and expectations that powerfully affect the behaviour of virtually all subjects in all formal experimental situations.
- (b) The dimension of the hypnotist, which includes such variables as the hypnotist's skill, charisma, wisdom and effectiveness in communicating with and profoundly influencing the subject.
- (c) The dimension of instructions and suggestions, including suggestions that especially fit the fantasy-prone subject (suggestions for age-regression, age-progression, past-life regression and the suggestions included in the Creative Imagination Scale), suggestions that especially fit the amnesia-prone subject (suggestions for 'blocking out' memories, pain, audition, vision and other sensations), and suggestions that especially fit the positively set subject (suggestions for heightened strength and endurance, enhanced learning abilities, and heightened awareness, proficiency, enjoyment and so on) (Barber, 1985, 1990, 1993).

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