
HYPNOSIS — REAL AND ASSUMED

Hypnosis does not lie in the heartland of Academic Psychology. Requests that it should be included in college psychology courses used to stimulate replies such as "I don't think we can go into medical psychology here" or "Freud rejected hypnotism because his patients used to fall in love with him." (laughter).

Discussion of hypnosis has become a bit more acceptable in college circles now that cognition has taken over the heartland of academic psychology from the mechanical behaviourists.

Consciousness is a part of 'condition' and on its coat tails comes hypnosis (and meditation) as altered states of consciousness. So the newer textbooks often have a few pages on it.

Academic research on hypnosis involves experiments. This creates a different frame of reference for considering the nature and significance of hypnotism than research which involves therapy.

An important difference involves emotion and transference. Scientific studies of hypnosis ignore them. Glynn Seaborn Jones who contributes a piece to this issue, treats them, like other psychotherapists who use hypnosis in their repertoire, as central.

Much of the academic work looks scientifically at the obedience aspect of hypnosis: the effect of one person telling someone else to do something which we would not normally think possible. The greater the feat that a hypnotised person can do the greater they are said to be hypnotised. Stage hypnotists used to make a living out of this.

One thread in this scientific research on obedience to hypnotists, although sterile in intent, links well with the 'human potential' approach to psychology. But first a description of the experiments.

About twenty years ago Theodore Xenophon Barber set out to prove that the term hypnotic trance was a mystification. He carried out lots of experiments and reviewed dozens more which showed that what you do when you are hypnotised depends on what you expect to happen and that the ability to be deeply hypnotised depends on whether you find it interesting or not.

Expectations and interest in hypnotism can easily change as a result of experience or as the result of influence from a respected expert such as an experimenter.

More surprisingly people who are pretending to be hypnotised are just as good at carrying out the feats typical of hypnotised people. This discovery seems to have been made by Stanley Orne and many others have found it to be true.

Barber's intention in his work was to rid the English language of terms like trance and altered state of consciousness and to enhance terms like attitude, belief and motivation which can be 'operationalised' and measured and used like objective explanatory variables.

The experiments have a sort of appeal to them, just as stage hypnosis, mischief and hoaxes do. But they can also be used to justify an optimistic view about the term 'states of consciousness', a term which like trance is alive and well. Here is a selection of them.

Nurses who had been told in a lecture that hypnosis is easy with gullible people were more difficult to hypnotise than those who had been told it was only possible with those who had good powers of concentration. (Do lecturers still disseminate disinformation in the interests of experimentation?)

Men who held a heavy weight at arms length for an amazing length of time when hypnotised and told it was resting on a table and was light held it out for even longer un hypnotised when they were given a financial incentive and (wrongly) told that the average female did better than their hypnotised performance.

But it is the experiments comparing the obedience of hypnotised people with those who are pretending which leads to the important bit. These subjects know that the experimenter will end the experiment if they believe that the subject is pretending. The longer the experiment goes on the more the subjects' confidence grows as their pretence has not been rumbled.

It turns out that although experienced hypnotists think they would be able to distinguish hypnotised from simulating subjects in an experiment it turns out they are not able to do this at all reliably.

Also, feats carried out by pretenders were as spectacular as those achieved by hypnotised subjects. Some of these would keep a theatre audience amused.

An arm plunged in ice cold water fairly soon feels intolerable pain...unless you are hypnotised (or pretending) and have been told that it will be moist and pleasant, in which case you stay immersed and don't complain.

Some subjects were told to go back in time and relive their seventh birthday. Their handwriting, spelling, errors in telling the time and trouble with tying a bow were characteristic of the age group for pretenders as well as for hypnotised subjects. They were mostly quite good too at knowing what day of the week their seventh birthday was on.

Hands have been plunged in acid and poisonous snakes reached out for by entranced and pretending subjects

alike. Concerts have been hallucinated and pretenders continued conducting in time to the imaginary music even after (real) bells rang, the lights went out and running could be heard outside. There was a slight difference here. Hypnotised subjects showed more survival instinct and reacted as if there were a fire hazard sooner than the pretenders.

People who had agreed to take part in an experiment for a decent rate of pay and who were told under hypnosis that they would have no desire to go and get their money afterwards stayed away for impressive periods of time. It was the same if they were only pretending to be hypnotised.

Incidentally, the commercial implications of this research have not been exploited by villains or anyone else. They must be considerable for the experimenters, who were quite happy telling fibs but were unhappy about robbing subjects, had to mail the pay to some of the more obedient (pretending) subjects

Although the articles and books which report this type of research discuss its significance in terms of whether or not a trance state explanation of hypnosis is more appropriate than explanations in terms of the demands which playing a role will make on people, there is another more pertinent conclusion which we can draw. It could start with posing questions:

'Who said we can't stretch ourselves between two chairs

and have two fat men sit on us?' 'Who says we cannot raise or lower our heart rate a few beats because we choose to?' 'Who says I cannot recall the day of the week that my eighth birthday fell on?' Throw away those tapes. Given the right setting we can show strength, endurance and skill and we can recall our past. What we need from the setting so that we can do this is confidence and trust.

If we want to show our potential to an audience that seeks to be entertained or to an experimenter who wants to measure results that is fine. If we want to be told to stop abusing nicotine that is fine too. But note that we have an enormous potential to do and be and recall, and it does not have to be trivial. Ian Owen in this issue refers to the feeling and expression of pain and the part that hypnosis can play in enabling us to become competent even in extreme situations.

More importantly we can forget about hypnosis as a relationship in which one person bosses another one about. Instead we can use it to connect with our early experiences, relieve the feelings, discharge them and integrate the memory into our growing selves in a way which relieves us of patterned blocks and obsessions and enables us to take hold of our own power and pay full attention to what we are doing with vitality.

All that we need is a safe therapeutic setting and a therapist/guide who has been there and who has

learnt how to facilitate others who want to do it.

T. X. Barber's research shows that we have it in us to do these things so long as we give our consent, believe it is desirable and our confidence is supported as we do it. It seems fine to call the process hypnosis.

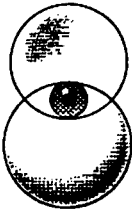
Perhaps we should recognise that our consciousness is constantly altering depending on where we are and on what we are doing.

Perhaps Barber is correct. The hypnotic state should be demythologised. It is no more different from 'normal' consciousness than anything else is, unless we choose to

label it as different, because our everyday consciousness varies all the time.

Being fully engaged in a conversation or engrossed in working with someone else or in a film, a game or an argument seems to be no more different from 'normal' than a trance does. It is just a different event. The fact that the people who nowadays take that view are labelled primitive - undeveloped - third/world - might be persuasive either for or against this way of looking at it depending on whether you believe they lack something good that we have or we have lost something good that they have. Or both? Or neither.

David Jones



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