

DEFENCE MECHANISMS AND SUGGESTIBILITY

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Abstract

This study was geared towards testing the relationship between responsiveness to hypnotic suggestions and the psychodynamic mechanisms of defence. Ninety Chinese participants were invited to attend a suggestibility test session and completed a measure of defence style. Most of the defence scales did not vary significantly with the suggestibility. The only type of defence which showed a significant association with the suggestibility was idealization. The implications of the findings were discussed in the psychodynamic and Chinese context. Copyright © 2006 British Society of Experimental & Clinical Hypnosis. Published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: Chinese, Creative Imagination Scale, defence mechanisms, defence style, face management, suggestibility

Introduction

Hypnotic suggestibility has been found to be associated with a range of factors, which are potentially useful in differentiating high and low susceptible persons, such as involvement in imagination and fantasy-prone personality (e.g. Wilson and Barber, 1978; Lynn and Rhue, 1986). The fundamental manoeuvre underlying fantasy-proneness is perhaps the ability to shift attention from the external world to the inner experience; to disengage from reality monitoring in service of the creation and acceptance of imagination as a real experience. This implies relinquishing or handing over executive control to a hypnotist. This process poses a potential threat to the ego and mobilizes its defence. Accordingly, one would anticipate that the mechanism of ego's defence, which constitutes part of the monitoring function aiming at preserving the ego integrity in an adaptive or maladaptive manner, is inherently in an opposing position against the letting go process and therefore perhaps obstructs one's response to suggestions.

Based upon the tenet that suggestibility can be determined, to a certain extent, in terms of fantasy and related cognitive processes, Barber and Wilson (1978) constructed the Creative Imagination Scale (CIS) to measure responsiveness to waking hypnotic suggestions. The scale consists of ten test suggestions that inform participants to think and imagine some scenarios, and can be delivered with or without a formal trance induction. The CIS is a practically valuable and reliable instrument that correlates well with other cognitive variables, especially vividness of imagery, and it presents itself as a useful instrument for measuring subjects' potential for mental absorption (e.g. Tellegen Absorption Scale; Sheehan, McConkey and Law, 1978).

The CIS was shown to be positively related to scores on other imagining tests such as the Betts Test of Mental Imagery and the Gordon Test of Imagery Control (Richardson, 1969), dissociation and absorption as measured by the Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES), General Dissociation Scale (GDS), and Tellegen Absorption Scale (TAS; Sapp and Hitchcock, 2003). Significant correlations between CIS scores and absorbed and directed attention was also documented, with high suggestible subjects showing greater attentional capacity (Sigman, Phillips and Clifford, 1985). More crucially, CIS suggestibility evidently varies with the ability to disengage from reality monitoring (Hyman and Billings, 1998).

While it can be argued that one's level of defensiveness or defence style is difficult to measure, some assessment tools have indeed been generated. The Defence Style Questionnaire (DSQ), originally developed by Bond, Gardner, Christian and Sigal (1983) and later revised by Andrews, Singh and Bond (1993) is a widely adopted instrument. By using the statistical technique of factor analysis, Andrews et al. (1993) organized the defence mechanisms that the DSQ measures into three factors or styles: mature, neurotic and immature. The mature style comprises sublimation, humour, anticipation and suppression. Undoing, pseudo-altruism, idealization and reaction formation are neurotic defences. The immature defences consist of projection, passive aggression, acting out, isolation, devaluation, autistic fantasy, denial, displacement, dissociation, splitting, rationalization and somatization.

By employing the DSQ, Andrew, Pollock and Stewart's (1989) early study was able to demonstrate that patients with anxiety disorders tend to use more immature and neurotic defences and less mature defences. Along this line of research, the efficacy of the DSQ has been revealed by its extensive associations with different clinical conditions such as depression (Besser, 2004) and personality disorders (Bond et al., 1983; Johnson, Bornstein and Krukonis, 1992; Bond, Paris and Zweig-Frank, 1994; Sammallahti, Aalberg and Pentinsaari, 1994), clinical scales like the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-II (Sinha and Watson, 1999) and the MMPI Personality Disorder scales (Sinha and Watson, 1999), as well as other psychological parameters such as forgiveness (Maltby and Day, 2004).

Would there be any association between overall defensive functioning and suggestibility? Specifically, would neurotic and immature defences hamper responsiveness to hypnotic suggestions? Conversely, can mature defences facilitate suggestibility? Do high and low suggestible persons adopt different defence styles? All these questions are fundamentally important, but have thus far received no empirical attention. Therefore, the present study examined the association between defence mechanisms and suggestibility by using the two widely-used scales, namely the CIS and the DSQ.

Method

Participants

A total of 90 Hong Kong undergraduates, initially reported in Yu (2005), formed the current sample and comprised 24 males (26.7%) and 66 females (77.3%). The average age was 21.64 years ($SD = 2.76$; Range = 20–46). None had experienced hypnosis. Participants were administered the CIS in a laboratory setting in two groups.

Measures

CIS

The CIS (Barber and Wilson, 1978) assesses subjective responses to ten test-suggestions. The ten suggestions provide descriptions that guide participants to use their own thinking

and creative imagining in order to experience the suggested effects. Following administration of the CIS, the participants were asked to rate their experiences for each of the ten test-suggestions, by indicating the extent to which each imagined experience matched the corresponding real experience on a five-point scale ranging from: 'not at all the same' as the real thing (score of 0) to 'almost exactly the same' as the real thing (score of 4). Thus scores on each of the ten test-suggestions can range from 0 to 4, and total scale scores on the CIS can range from 0 to 40. (See Yu, 2005, for more details and findings of the CIS suggestibility of the Chinese sample.)

DSQ-40

The DSQ-40 (Andrews et al., 1993) adopted in the current study is a revised version of the original measure developed by Bond et al. (1983). The DSQ-40 comprises 20 defence scales, with two items for each defence. The defences are organized into three factors or styles: mature, neurotic and immature. Participants were required to indicate their responses to the 40 items on a 9-point scale from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 9 = 'strongly agree'.

Results

The mean scores of all three styles and 20 scales of defence mechanisms as well as their correlations with the CIS ratings are provided in Table 1. The mean score of the mature defence style (Range = 3.3–8.25) was higher than the mean score of the neurotic defence style (Range = 3.25–7.13), which were in turn higher than that of the immature defence style (Range = 2.92–6.08). All three- (chi-square (2, $N = 90$) = 66.80, $p < 0.001$) and two-way differences (all $p < 0.01$) between the three defence styles were significant. This pattern was reminiscent of the findings of the Andrews et al.'s. (1993) Western study. Nevertheless, the Chinese participants scored substantially higher than the Western sample in the neurotic and immature defence styles. Anticipation was the most likely defence adopted by the Chinese participants, followed by pseudo-altruism and sublimation. This differed from the Western normative distribution, in which humour, anticipation and rationalization were ranked highest on average. On the other hand, denial was the least commonly employed defence among the Chinese participants, but its mean score was still clearly higher than the Western counterpart.

The Chinese participants displayed higher mean scores than the Western sample across the 20 defence scales. The only exceptions were humour, suppression and rationalization. More than half of the mean scores were substantially (1 point) higher than those reported in the Western study. The greatest mean discrepancy between the Western and Chinese samples among the 20 defences was somatization (mean difference = 2.16), followed by dissociation (mean difference = 1.62) and autistic fantasy (mean difference = 1.53).

All three primary defence styles did not vary significantly with the CIS suggestibility (Table 1). As regards the correlations between the CIS ratings and the scores of the 20 defence scales, only the defence of idealization reached the significant level ($p < 0.01$). All other defences including somatization, dissociation, and autistic fantasy were not significantly correlated with the CIS suggestibility.

The participants were stratified according to their CIS scores: high (29–40), medium high (21–28), medium low (11–20) and low (0–10). Significant difference was only found in the defence of idealization between the four groups (chi-square (3, $N = 83$) = 12.01, $p < 0.01$). There were no significant differences in all other defence styles and scales.

Table 1. Normative Distribution and Correlations with CIS (N = 90)

Defence	Mean \pm SD	Western mean	Mean difference	Correlation with CIS r_s/p
Mature style	5.68 \pm 0.84	5.76	-0.08	-0.01/0.939
Neurotic style	5.34 \pm 0.89	4.32	1.02	0.19/0.086
Immature style	4.63 \pm 0.74	3.54	1.09	0.20/0.075
Sublimation	5.77 \pm 1.49	5.45	0.32	0.14/0.197
Humour	5.16 \pm 1.22	6.44	-1.28	-0.06/0.594
Anticipation	6.49 \pm 1.19	5.72	0.77	-0.04/0.721
Suppression	5.30 \pm 1.23	5.50	-0.20	0.04/0.741
Undoing	5.44 \pm 1.22	4.26	1.18	0.16/0.138
Pseudo-altruism	6.11 \pm 1.36	5.14	0.97	0.09/0.425
Idealization	5.08 \pm 1.53	3.64	1.44	0.29/0.009**
Reaction formation	4.72 \pm 1.29	4.17	0.55	-0.05/0.631
Projection	3.73 \pm 1.43	2.34	1.39	0.11/0.315
Passive aggression	4.44 \pm 1.26	3.20	1.24	0.20/0.075
Acting out	5.62 \pm 1.42	4.70	0.92	0.23/0.038*
Isolation	4.50 \pm 1.83	4.08	0.42	-0.09/0.433
Devaluation	4.21 \pm 1.18	3.06	1.15	0.22/0.048*
Autistic fantasy	5.16 \pm 1.58	3.63	1.53	0.09/0.430
Denial	3.49 \pm 1.31	2.88	0.61	0.13/0.253
Displacement	4.92 \pm 1.39	3.48	1.44	-0.02/0.880
Dissociation	4.47 \pm 1.18	2.85	1.62	0.16/0.151
Splitting	4.34 \pm 1.39	3.78	0.56	0.22/0.048*
Rationalization	5.54 \pm 1.26	5.57	-0.03	0.09/0.411
Somatization	5.21 \pm 1.54	3.05	2.16	0.08/0.479

Note: Western mean = mean scores reported in Andrews et al.'s study (1993); Mean difference = mean difference between the Chinese and the Western samples.

Similar results were obtained when the participants were divided into high and low susceptible groups. That is, apart from idealization ($z = 3.19$, $p < 0.01$; mean for low susceptible group = 4.65, mean for high susceptible group = 5.70), all differences between the two groups with respect to the defence styles and scales were not significant.

Discussion

Compared with the Western sample, the Chinese participants exhibited a general high level of defensiveness. In particular, the Chinese participants were more inclined to the neurotic and immature defence styles, and were more likely to use such defences as somatization, dissociation and autistic fantasy. The present analyses result in an unexpected scenario that suggestibility is not necessarily modulated by defence styles. There are several explanations for this. The reluctance to receive hypnotic suggestions is perhaps a specific type of defence which cannot be properly captured by the measure of the classical defensive mechanisms in the psychoanalytic sense. Alternatively, the resistance to hypnotic suggestions by itself is not directly related to defence styles. That is, the presumption of the dynamic relation between suggestibility and defence mechanisms set forth in the introduction is erroneous. Still another possible explanation is that the permissive nature of the CIS renders this test less likely to be perceived as a threat of

mind control than the standard hypnotic procedure. Considering that defence mechanisms transpire literally in reaction to anxiety, under the secure condition devoid of the potential anxiety towards the label of hypnosis, the neurotic and immature defence styles therefore do not, as one would expect, jeopardize participants' performance or involvement in the CIS suggestibility test.

Paradoxically, the present finding indicated that the defence of autistic fantasy was not significantly correlated with the CIS suggestibility, which is by definition an ability to fantasize. On the other hand, autistic fantasy is a defence mechanism through which people dissociate themselves from reality so as to get totally engrossed in the inner experience. This is ipso facto an essential attribute of hypnosis. Perhaps one of the major differences between the two is that the defence of autistic fantasy is intrinsically functional for its prime effect of protecting the ego integrity while CIS suggestibility is of its own accord functionally neutral. Further investigation is implicated in order to clarify the association or differentiation between suggestibility and autistic fantasy.

Interestingly, the CIS suggestibility was positively correlated with idealization, a sort of neurotic and 'image distorting' defence. This defence signifies a tendency to polarize one's positive attitudes and affects towards an object, leading to the object being conceived of as completely, ideally benign. In the same vein, idealization can be manifested in perception of and attitudes towards situational factors. By romanticizing the practice of the CIS, sensitizing the perception of stimuli and amplifying one's imagination, the defence of idealization thereby reinforces oneself stepping into vivid imaginative experience (i.e. 'polarizing one's experience').

Individuals constantly strive to present their good selves and at the same time to reduce anxiety in response to the anticipation of danger that threatens the ego integrity. To make this feasible, individuals employ a variety of defence mechanisms. A relatively high level of defensiveness of the Chinese is after all conceivable in view of the famous Chinese phenomenon of face management, which involves using strategies to enhance and protect an individual's claimed sense of positive image in social interaction. Nevertheless, the uses of neurotic and immature defences do not necessarily hamper the susceptibility to CIS suggestions, and people with different degrees of defensiveness seem to have in general similar responses to the CIS. One of the possible reasons is that the CIS, a non-authoritarian suggestibility test, eliminates participants' anxiety and defensive actions effectively. This explanation however remains open for further investigation and clarification.

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