

DISCUSSION COMMENTARY

CLEARING THE DECKS AGAIN?

Alan Gauld

University of Nottingham

It is now more than 40 years since Barber began a series of publications which, within a decade, had strikingly influenced academic thinking about hypnosis. That influence had three closely linked aspects. One aspect was methodological. Barber argued that the methodological assumptions of a good deal of the earlier work (assumptions which had led to a general but mistaken acceptance of the concept of ‘hypnotic trance’) were unsound; and he spelled out and implemented what he regarded as the desiderata of proper experimental method in the field. Another was sceptical. Methodological considerations led him to reject the purported evidence for some of the more startling hypnotic phenomena (for example, hypnotic blistering or hypnotic hallucinations that are ‘as real as real’ to the subjects). The third was theoretical. Barber developed an ‘operational’ approach to the explanation of ‘hypnotic’ phenomena. The phenomena of ‘hypnosis’ are to be understood in terms of the functional relations between dependent, independent and mediating variables (for example, attitudes, motives, expectancies) that (unlike the concept of trance) can be operationally specified by reference to observable events. All this was expressed with a forcefulness and a stark clarity that made a more telling impact on contemporaries than did the kindred doubts also being expressed by other writers. Although Barber’s theoretical proposals did not take root, at any rate in their ‘operational’ form, his critique of prevailing methodology and his methodological prescriptions, together with his scepticism about the more exotic phenomena, led to a widespread sweeping away of older assumptions, and a clearing of the decks for renewed and possibly innovative action. Fellows (1986: 52) has described the early period of Barber’s work and influence as ‘essentially destructive’; and this is a largely correct assessment.

Some of those who fell under Barber’s influence at this time have remained in many respects closer to his early ideas than he has himself. They have accepted much of his methodological critique with its consequent pruning of extravagant claims, and they have developed theoretical frameworks that make no reference to ‘trance’ states and other altered states of consciousness, but tend to use commonplace and uncontroversial concepts, much like Barber’s attitudes, motives and expectancies, but often given a social or social-cognitive twist. This has made for attractively simple if somewhat pedestrian explanations. Barber himself has been much more adventurous. His work in the 1970s and 1980s on hypnosis, suggestibility and the creative imagination, and on gifted fantasizers, led to substantial modifications to his views on hypnotic hallucinations and suggested skin markings, and ultimately to the three-dimensional theory of hypnosis currently under discussion. I am not sure that Barber’s choice of such phrases as ‘three dimensions of hypnosis’ or even ‘three kinds of hypnosis’ is altogether happy (Barber, 1999). His article is mainly devoted to distinguishing three kinds of very good hypnotic subject (presumably as assessed by their scores on

standard scales of hypnotic susceptibility) and most of the evidence he presents relates to that issue rather than to the question of three kinds or dimensions of hypnosis. Obviously, three different kinds of hypnotic subject, with differing kinds of life histories, *might* in the end reach about the same kind of psychophysiological terminus. There are indications that they probably do not, but the main priority at this stage has to be further work on the three proposed types of hypnotic 'virtuoso'. Barber's proposals would benefit from further empirical support; investigations of the immediate psychophysiological antecedents of hypnotic responding in the three types of outstanding subject, besides being very difficult to design and carry out, are secondary to securing general agreement that these three types of subject exist and more or less constitute the field. A point that I would particularly like to see clarified is that of the exact status of the amnesias of the amnesia-prone subjects (the evidence for which must presumably come mostly from the statements of the subjects themselves). A good many experimental studies of hypnotic amnesia have of course suggested that hypnotic amnesia is a remarkably labile phenomenon; if the amnesias of the amnesia-prone turned out to be altogether different in this respect we would have grounds for supposing that the amnesia-prone subjects are indeed very different from positively motivated ones.

Agreement that Barber's proposals merit careful consideration should not be too difficult to obtain. Current theories of hypnosis (Lynn and Rhue, 1991) present an extraordinarily variegated and confusing picture, and it must be significant that so many theories invoke a multitude of variables in their attempts to explain hypnotic phenomena. The idea that there may be more than one kind of hypnotic virtuoso has been in the air for some while (for example, McConkey, Glisky and Kihlstrom, 1989; Pekala, 1991). Barber's formulation has the same clarity and sharpness of outline as his statements of many years ago and should similarly serve to concentrate attention on the important issues under scrutiny. It has additional advantages. One could easily interpret certain celebrated past cases in the light of it; although this would probably be unprofitable since we generally lack essential details of the subjects' backgrounds, early experiences, traumas and so on. It might also be applied to cases of multiple personality and kindred disorders, which have historically always been linked to hypnosis (Barber's 'positively set' subjects would correspond to MPD 'sufferers' who are more or less deliberately role-playing). And it leaves room for some of the more remarkable of the alleged phenomena. Most workers who have practised or witnessed hypnosis extensively will have come across the very occasional outstanding subject who presents phenomena that are, from any ordinary point of view, quite astonishing. Cases that come to my own mind include three that I encountered in small private gatherings before I had read any of Barber's early sceptical writings. Two (both of whom claimed to have had no prior knowledge or experience of hypnosis) passed into apparent deep trances in the background while other subjects were being worked on; both exhibited striking positive and negative post-hypnotic hallucinations; one (despite a prior explanation of the projected experiment) became deeply and most convincingly anxious and, taking me on one side, said she had seen 'such funny things' that she feared she was losing her mind; the other maintained with a slightly bemused (and equally convincing) stubbornness that the objects which he had seen appear and disappear so surprisingly had been deposited or whisked away by clever conjuring. A third subject exhibited hypnotic 'burn' marks which came up before the eyes of myself or another witness in a minute or so. It is, of course, quite easy to find forms of words from, say, a social-cognitive viewpoint to explain or

explain away most of these informal findings; but it becomes much harder when one has talked extensively to the subjects in question to find these explanations unreservedly acceptable. That, at any rate, has been my experience, and I do not doubt that it has been shared by many others, with whom Barber's more recent and less austere position will strike a chord.

It would be quite unproductive simply to look for grounds on which to refute Barber's current proposals. Indeed, I do not see how one can deny the likelihood that there are different routes to becoming a hypnotic virtuoso, and/or different kinds of individual who can become one. The more interesting questions have to do with how the theory may be developed and whether its main lines will need substantial modification. For instance, Barber distinguishes subtypes of each of his three categories of very good subjects, seven subtypes in all. But there surely will be more subtypes than these, as is indeed implied by his talking of 'at least two subtypes' and so forth. Thus, I have encountered several persons (not subjected to hypnosis, although one afterwards turned out to be an excellent subject) who presented signs of being highly gifted fantasizers, and yet became, as it were, trapped in unpleasant or frightening fantasy episodes (probably initiated by auto-suggestions) from which they seemed unable to escape by their own volition. These malignant fantasies were very different from the benign and largely controllable ones with which Barber's gifted fantasizers solaced or amused themselves, and they apparently cut across his proposed subtypes of the fantasy-prone. What I principally wonder, however, is whether the three categories of very good subject really will turn out to be quite as separate from each other (distinct populations, as it were) as Barber's account implies. It is not at all obvious, for example, that gifted fantasizers could not also be positively motivated (in the same way as 'positively motivated' subjects), with the additional lift that would bring to hypnotic performance; but their positive motivation would be largely disguised by their striking talents as fantasizers. Barber certainly says (1999: 24) that the hypnotic *failure* of an appreciable percentage of fantasy-prone subjects could be due to 'possible negative attitudes, motivations, or expectations toward the idea of hypnosis'. Again, some fantasy-prone individuals had fairly miserable childhoods from which they retreated into fantasy (Wilson and Barber, 1983: 349). What would such persons have become if they had been victims of really appalling childhood abuse? Would some of them (Barber's fantasy-prone second subtype) have evolved into amnesia-prone subjects of Barber's first subtype, with their gifts for fantasizing hived off into one of those vivacious and imaginative alter personalities of which the literature provides various records, plus a relatively inert and unimaginative 'primary' personality which might be equally the product of a sustained fantasy? Are we dealing here with a difference of degree rather than of kind? Altogether, it would not be entirely surprising if there turn out to be more 'mixed and betwixt' types of hypnotic virtuoso than Barber allows for.

Likewise, some workers will undoubtedly argue that there are more 'minor dimensions' (another rather vague use of the word) of hypnosis than just Barber's three (my own suggestion would be the more or less institutionalized, if erroneous, concept of hypnosis that is endemic and quite influential in most Western societies), and even that what Barber calls the 'minor' dimensions are really the 'major' ones and vice versa. But I will not pursue that particular hare further. If there is any substance in Barber's new proposals – and I personally would find it very surprising if there is not – they could lead to a rather welcome clearing of cluttered decks, much as did his earlier proposals of 30 years ago and more; and a first result would have to be

not a rejection exactly, but a somewhat cool reassessment of considerable parts of the experimental work of the past few decades. For much of that work used subjects who, if they could be described as hypnotically gifted at all (which often they could not), belonged only to one of Barber's three 'gifted' categories, that of the positively motivated. And results obtained with positively motivated subjects can by no means be safely assumed to hold true also of subjects of the other two 'gifted' categories.

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Address for correspondence:

Alan Gauld

Department of Psychology,
University of Nottingham,
Nottingham NG7 2 RD, UK