

DISCUSSION COMMENTARY

HYPNOSIS: THREE DIMENSIONS, ONE THEORY?

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Barber (1999) reviews a considerable body of research pointing to three dimensions of hypnosis associated with fantasy-prone, amnesia-prone and positively set persons, and claims that the three dimensions provide a new understanding of hypnosis and a new multidimensional paradigm. The fantasy-prone and amnesia-prone individuals are distinguished by being both hypnotic virtuosos and possessing extreme abilities for fantasy or amnesia, and their accounts suggest that prolonged exposure to positive or negative experiences have provided them with different routes into hypnotic responding.

Barber's view is that by virtue of the peculiar cognitive abilities that underlie their experiential control and that facilitate hypnotic responding, fantasy-prone and amnesia-prone individuals can provide insights into the nature of hypnosis and, together with the positively set group, suggest three types of hypnosis. Despite its advantages, there are risks in such a view when these distinctive individual characteristics are neither necessary nor sufficient to guarantee very high hypnotic susceptibility. For example, findings that not all fantasy-prone individuals are hypnotic virtuosos are explained by the situational variables that form such an important part in the cognitive-social approach. But those same variables identified with Barber's paradigm shift of 30 years ago (Barber, 1969) are invoked to account for susceptibility scores of positive-set individuals, whether virtuosos or not. All three groups are susceptible to their influence and the question arises whether, despite the distinguishing descriptions of their backgrounds, continuing day-to-day experiences, and hypnotic responding, there are sufficient similarities to blur the distinction between groups. It is pertinent to note here that Barber draws on the results of Pekala (1991) to support the three groupings. But, whereas Pekala (1991) found evidence of three groups of very high susceptibles (11 and 12 on the Harvard Group Scale of Hypnotic Susceptibility (HGSHS)) that share much in common with Barber's classification, somewhat similar groupings were found for subjects with lower scores (9 and 10 on the HGSHS). Indeed, there was evidence for distinct groups both within and between several levels of susceptibility. So, Pekala's results can be taken as showing overlap in the routes to hypnotic responding adopted by virtuosos and high scorers, rather than clear distinctions between them.

It is quite noticeable that the description of the fantasy-prone and positively set groups share much that is to do with 'imagining'. And, it is not inconceivable, for example, that some positively set individuals draw on the experience of sleep to facilitate responding (Barrett, 1994), thus sharing processes with the amnesia-prone group. There is, then, the possibility that, at another level, much of Barber's description of the positively set group can be applied to both of the other groups. Can they not *all* be conceptualized as 'actively seeking ways to construct or synthesise the experience that was suggested' (Sheehan and McConkey, 1982), or interpreting hypnotic suggestions as calling for the construction of 'as if' situations (for example, Spanos and

Burgess, 1994)? The processes involved in ‘thinking with and imagining the suggested ideas while letting go of extraneous and contrary thoughts’ by the positively set group are underspecified by Barber and it is possible to speculate that they bear some resemblance to those used by the other groups, that is, there are differences in degree rather than of kind. While the amnesia-prone and fantasy-prone individuals are easily able to call on well-established skills in pursuit of these aims, the positive-set individuals have more difficulty setting somewhat similar processes in operation. Do such possibilities diminish the value of distinguishing between three types of hypnosis or should the groups be subsumed under a higher-level theory such as might be based, for example, on attentional control?

Not surprisingly, encouraged by developments in cognitive psychology, the notion of attentional control has featured prominently in accounts of hypnotic susceptibility. Hilgard’s neodissociation theory (1977), of course, is the prime example of such an approach, but Bowers (for example, Woody and Bowers, 1994), rejecting the notion of amnesic barriers while seeking to account for the effects of situational variables on hypnotic responding and experiential changes encouraged by hypnotic suggestions, adopted Norman and Shallice’s (1986) supervisory attentional system to develop his theory involving the notion of *altered control*. In a parallel development, psychophysiological evidence has been used to argue that hypnotic induction recruits changes in brain function consistent with attentional shifts, which perceptual studies support, and which suggest that susceptibility is related to cognitive flexibility (for example, Crawford and Allen, 1983; Crawford and Gruzelier, 1992). Approaches such as these place hypnosis in the mainstream of psychological theory, but the theoretical integration that is offered by the concept of attention merely emphasizes that the flexibility of cognitive resources provides for multiple routes into hypnotic responding, both overt and experiential. So, it seems the value of Barber’s identification of the three groups would be emphasized rather than diminished by attempts to integrate them within higher-level cognitive theories of attentional processes adopted in the context of studies using predominantly positively set individuals.

In keeping with the research principles he outlined 30 years ago, Barber identifies experimental situations that could test the distinction between the three groups. Essentially, the proposals involve explorations of the interactions between type of subject, task and situational variables including type of suggestions. One of the obvious potential problems is that with the possible multiplication of subgroups of individuals within the major classifications, distinctiveness and predictive power will be lost. Nevertheless, these proposals seem likely to provoke a flurry of research and, whatever the outcome, that, together with the fascinating view that the study of fantasy-prone, amnesia-prone or positively set individuals greatly influenced the development of state and non-state theories of hypnosis, guarantees the importance of Barber’s chapter.

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