

## DISCUSSION COMMENTARY

### HOW SPECIAL CAN HYPNOSIS BE AND STILL REMAIN SAFE?

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#### INTRODUCTION

Frank Vingoe's report (1997, this issue pp. 48–52) adds some very interesting and important information to his original account. The first obvious point to be made is that the selection criteria he employed successfully discriminated between the expert and non-expert groups on all accounts. It is encouraging, and not unimportant, to find that those who are involved in consultation and practice in forensic hypnosis, also claim to have a greater knowledge of the experimental and clinical literature in the field, as well as a greater involvement in experimental research in the area.

As Vingoe notes, there are some potential areas of agreement between the two groups, but the differences are perhaps more interesting. Although conclusions are obviously limited by the small subject samples, if the results are at all generalizable, they seem to highlight some of the inconsistencies and paradoxes in beliefs about hypnosis that pervade modern views on the subject.

#### DANGEROUS, SAFE, BANAL OR SPECIAL?

Modern conceptions of hypnosis seem to be plagued by a number of inherent contradictions in the way hypnosis is defined and presented. This is particularly evident when attempts are made to draw together two dimensions, those of 'dangerous — safe', and 'banal — special'. Practitioners of hypnosis often find themselves in difficulties when trying to present hypnosis as a useful procedure that is not inherently 'dangerous' (at least in the right hands), yet, at the same time, as a special procedure that involves profound alterations in consciousness and the experience of volition.

For instance, on the basis of empirical research, many investigators have come to the same conclusions drawn in the early 1970's by Hartland (1974), and experts questioned by Conn (1972), that hypnotic subjects are not automata; they do not lose consciousness, control of their behaviour, or their normal moral scruples, and are no more likely to engage in self-repugnant or antisocial activities than equivalently motivated non-hypnotic subjects (see also, Barber, 1961, 1969; Coe, Kobayashi & Howard, 1972, 1973; Orne & Evans, 1965; Udolf, 1983). On first consideration, this would seem to fit with views of sociocognitive- or cognitive-behavioural theorists, who argue that hypnosis is not a special state of consciousness in which profound dissociations are experienced, but rather hypnotic phenomena can be explained in terms of more mundane concepts from mainstream psychology such as, attitudes, expectancies, compliance, conformity and imagination (for examples, see Lynn & Rhue, 1991). However, the evidence from those such as Conn, Hartland and Vingoe, would suggest that many supporters of the more traditional state and dissociative accounts of

hypnosis would also tend to endorse the same views concerning hypnosis and self-injurious and anti-social behaviours. Clearly Vingoe's data support what perhaps is a general trend amongst modern hypnosis researchers and practitioners of all theoretical persuasions, to abandon the concept of the hypnotic automaton under the control of the hypnotist, unaware of what is happening. This is reflected in the definition of hypnosis put forward by the American Psychological Association, Division of Psychological Hypnosis, which includes the statement that 'people who are hypnotized do not lose control over their behaviour . . . they typically remain aware of who they are and where they are' (1994, p.143). This definition has been widely, though not unanimously, endorsed by British hypnosis professionals (Fellows, 1994). If this is so, then the views of many hypnosis professionals are at variance with much public opinion, and clearly public education is necessary (see, for example, Daghish & Wright, 1991; McConkey & Jupp, 1986; Vingoe, 1995; Wagstaff, 1988; Wilson, Greene & Loftus, 1986).

However, this view is potentially problematic given that the idea of hypnotic automatism is not, in principle, at variance with some of the views presented in modern state and/or dissociationist accounts of hypnosis (see Wagstaff, 1991b; 1993). For example, probably the leading dissociationist theorist, E.R. Hilgard (1986), claims that during hypnosis deeply hypnotized subjects may transfer at least some, executive control to the hypnotist and, indeed, the loss of voluntary control over actions normally voluntary is one of the striking findings of hypnosis. This transfer of control leaves the hypnotist free to influence various aspects of thought and perception located in different dissociated 'parts' of the mind, hence, he says, 'distortions of reality that would normally be detected and corrected can be accepted without criticism in the hypnotic state', and these include 'changes in one's own personality' (Hilgard, 1985, p.165).

Another leading state researcher, K.S. Bowers (1983), claimed that hypnotic subjects enter a state of 'uncritical receptivity' (p. 83), and perceive events as happening to them, rather than being controlled by them, because 'executive control is minimised or bypassed when a hypnotized subject enacts the suggested state of affairs' (Bowers & Davidson, 1991, p. 107). Such ideas leave open the possibility that, due to dissociation, the hypnotic subject may be uncritical of his or her behaviour which is controlled by the hypnotist. Others have argued that the decline in reality monitoring that accompanies the hypnotic state is such that it is even possible to hypnotise some people without their being aware of it (Marcuse, 1976; Udolf, 1983; Wolberg, 1972). In addition, whilst the idea of unsuggested 'spontaneous amnesia' as a characteristic of hypnosis is largely rejected by hypnosis researchers, the idea that, if it is suggested, some subjects may be completely amnesic for events and cannot remember, no matter how hard they try, is not questioned by a number of theorists (see, for example, Bowers, 1983; Sheehan & McConkey, 1982).

Looking at Vingoe's results, one suspects that slightly different attitudes to this dilemma may account, in large part, for some of the differences between his selected and unselected groups.

### SAFE BUT NOT TOO SAFE

Looking first at the differences on Vingoe's 'beliefs and misconceptions' subscale, the impression given is that the unselected group were simply not as familiar with the literature on individual differences and changes in hypnotic susceptibility. The overwhelming impression from the 'antisocial behaviour' subscale data, however, is that

the unselected group were convinced that hypnosis is fundamentally a 'safe procedure'. Hence, they endorsed the ideas that during hypnosis, a person is aware of what he or she is doing and self-control is not given up to the hypnotist; also, a person cannot be hypnotized against his or her will, and cannot be made to behave against his or her moral standards, or engage in behaviour that he or she would not engage in when not 'hypnotized'.

In general, although the experts agreed with these views, some were not convinced about the latter. This might suggest that the unselected group were more sceptical about hypnosis. Significantly, however, a majority of the unselected group (and a minority of the experts) still wanted to retain the belief that a person can be 'hypnotized without him or her being aware of it'. This seems to contradict somewhat the views unanimously held by the unselected group, and most of the experts, that, when hypnotized, a person is aware of what he or she is doing, and a person cannot be hypnotized against his or her will.

On the memory subscale, there was also unanimous support for the view that hypnotic procedures do not routinely result in improved, accurate recall, a rejection of the idea that spontaneous amnesia automatically follows hypnosis, and an acceptance that pseudomemories can be implanted during hypnosis. This would suggest that some of the adverse publicity that has been given to the subject of the forensic use of hypnosis, has filtered through to those who are less familiar with the research literature. Nevertheless, a majority from both groups thought that suggested total amnesia is possible, and that hypnosis can aid memory.

## ON THE PRACTICAL UTILITY OF PARADOXICAL BELIEFS

It is not the case, therefore, that the unselected group were generally more sceptical than the 'experts'; rather the views of the unselected group seemed to reflect a slightly more exaggerated version of the paradoxical pattern shown by some experts. Without a detailed knowledge of the backgrounds of the unselected group it is impossible to judge with any certainty the basis for this pattern of beliefs; nevertheless, one cannot help but notice that such a pattern of beliefs might have a certain utility in practical applications of hypnosis.

To reiterate, the belief patterns seem to be as follows:

### *Hypnosis is safe*

For the most part, *hypnosis is safe*. Thus, hypnosis is not a danger to emotionally dependent people; hypnotized subjects are perfectly aware of what they are doing; they do not hand over control to the hypnotist; you do not need to be strong willed to resist being hypnotized; no one can be hypnotized against his or her will; people can lie during hypnosis; and even though the hypnotist may suggest things that are harmful, no hypnotized person can be made to behave against his or her moral standards, or engage in behaviour that he or she would not engage in when not hypnotized.

Such a view of hypnosis may indeed be perfectly accurate, but it also has obvious utility in three respects: first it makes hypnosis more attractive to potential clients (and laboratory subjects); second, it helps to absolve practitioners of any culpability when their clients or experimental subjects claim they have been damaged in some way (and who may be lying); and third, it serves to combat clients' and subjects' claims that they 'couldn't have been hypnotized, because they knew what was happening'.

*Hypnosis is special*

At the same time, *hypnosis is special*. Hence, a person can be hypnotized without he or she being aware of it; a hypnotized person may be especially susceptible to implanted pseudomemories; total suggested amnesia is possible following hypnosis; and hypnosis can aid memory.

The idea that one can be hypnotized without being aware of it, seems to be a particularly antiquated concept left over from the 19th century notion of the 'hypnotic automaton', but again, one can see it might have utility. Not only might it serve to maintain the mystique of hypnosis, but might also allow the practitioner to claim that a client or subject has been 'hypnotized' when the client or subject claims that nothing has happened. The idea that hypnosis is a useful memory aid, if used with caution (because of the special susceptibility of hypnotized subjects to pseudomemories), and that a person can be induced to remember nothing of a session, no matter how hard he or she tries, also serve to present hypnosis as a special or unusual phenomenon.

## FACING THE ISSUE SQUARELY

The essential point I want to raise in this commentary, and one which Vingoe's data illustrate well, is that as hypnosis theorists, researchers and practitioners, we cannot have our proverbial cake and eat it. If we really believe that a person can be 'hypnotized', without being aware of it, can have pseudomemories (perhaps even false personalities) implanted in his or her mind, and then be made to forget about everything that has happened in a way which indicates that control of his or her memory is handed over to the hypnotist, then we are indeed dealing with a rather special technique that is ripe for abuse, and this should be acknowledged. (For a similar view on the APA definition, see Bowers, 1994.)

Arguably these issues are perhaps less problematic for some who adopt a non-state sociocognitive perspective, and view hypnotic behaviour primarily as a role enactment. According to this perspective, it is clearly a mistake to say that a person can be 'hypnotized' without being aware of it, or that a person really can forget *everything*, no matter how hard he or she tries to remember, as a person deliberately enacts the hypnotic role and amnesia is fundamentally a strategic enactment (Spanos, 1986, 1991; Wagstaff, 1991a). Also, from this perspective, there are limits to the kind of suggested pseudomemories that hypnotic subjects are likely to genuinely accept (see, for example, Spanos & McLean, 1983). On the other hand, the hypnotic situation can indeed be a powerful social situation, especially in terms of experimenter-subject, and therapist-client relationships, which like many other social situations, such as Milgram's (1974) psychological experiments on obedience, and doctor-patient interactions, is quite able to make people act 'unusually' or counter to their 'normal' moral scruples, and can be judged accordingly. Thus, for some sociocognitive theorists, there is no inherent contradiction in the views that a 'hypnotized' person is aware of what he or she is doing, and has not lost control over his or her actions, yet can be made to act unusually or against his or her 'normal' moral scruples. Hypnotic subjects are as prone to trickery, emotional manipulation, coercion and duress, as anyone else.

It is not at all clear, however, whether Vingoe's unselected subjects, and many of his 'experts', are really prepared to face these issues squarely; and until the mixed messages stop, it is difficult to see why we should expect the general public to change their apparently 'exaggerated' views about the nature of hypnosis.

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