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# HOW TO BE A 'GOOD' HYPNOTIC SUBJECT!

**Victoria West and Brian Fellows**

*Department of Psychology, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth*

**ABSTRACT**

This paper reviews a major debate within the field of hypnosis: the stability of hypnotic susceptibility. State theorists, who maintain that hypnosis is a special and unique process, believe that hypnotic responding is a stable and enduring trait (Hilgard, 1965). Non-state theorists, who maintain that hypnosis involves psychological processes such as imaginative skills, motivation and expectancies, believe that hypnotic responding is a skill which can be acquired. Such theorists have shown that with cognitive skills training hypnotic susceptibility can be significantly enhanced (Gorassini & Spanos, 1986). However, attempts to replicate such findings in other laboratories have not always been successful (Bates, Miller, Cross & Brigham, 1988) and there has been much controversy concerning whether the training promotes 'genuine' changes in hypnotic responsiveness or whether it simply promotes behavioural compliance (Bates, 1990).

The research reported here has shown a positive training effect and has employed a qualitative technique of inquiry (the Experiential Analysis Technique: Sheehan & McConkey, 1978) in order to examine the effects of hypnotic skills training upon the strategies and cognitive processes that are employed by hypnotic subjects. Preliminary analysis of this data indicates the existence of a wide variety of complex hypnotic experiences, which confirms the findings of Sheehan and McConkey (1982). The technique has certainly provided a unique and rich insight into the experience of hypnosis and a clearer idea about how such an experience can be enhanced.

## INTRODUCTION

Until quite recently it was widely accepted that people were 'good' or 'bad' hypnotic subjects by nature, i.e., that hypnotic susceptibility was a stable and enduring trait, not modifiable by training (Hilgard, 1965). This is the view held by state theorists. Test-retest correlations of 0.71 have been found after 25 years (Piccione, Hilgard & Zimbardo, 1989) and support this view. However, non-state theorists see hypnotic phenomena as resulting from social and cognitive processes and argue that hypnotic responding is a skill that can be trained. Research conducted by Nicholas Spanos and his colleagues at Carleton University in Canada has shown that hypnotic susceptibility can be significantly enhanced with the use of a cognitive skills training programme — the Carleton Skill Training Package (CSTP) (Gorassini & Spanos, 1986). Their explanation of the test-retest stability is that between testings the subjects are rarely exposed to information that changes their attitudes and interpretational sets, and for this reason their hypnotic responsiveness is likely to remain the same. This position therefore predicts that the provision of such information, via the CSTP, will lead to changes in susceptibility.

Early hypnotic training packages were based on a single social learning variable

(e.g., Crouse & Kurtz, 1984) and only produced small susceptibility enhancements. However, with the CSTP, which is a multi-component programme, significant enhancements have been produced in susceptibility (see Spanos, 1986, for a review). But how is this done? How do you become a good hypnotic subject?

The CSTP is a program that is designed to *instruct* subjects how to respond to hypnotic suggestions. It consists of four basic components:

1. an introductory talk aimed at creating positive attitudes towards hypnosis, explaining that hypnosis is a learnable skill;
2. explicit instructions on how to respond hypnotically, stressing the need to:
   a) enact each suggestion
   b) vividly imagine each suggestion;
3. viewing a model responding hypnotically;
4. practice at four suggestions.

The information included in the CSTP is initially directed at rectifying misconceptions about hypnosis and goes on to emphasize the importance of becoming absorbed in imagining the 'make-believe' situations suggested. The detailed information about how to interpret suggestions is conveyed in two ways. First, the experimenter provides subjects with explicit information (the second component) and, second, subjects are shown a video-taped model who successfully responds to a series of suggestions (the third component); throughout the demonstration, the model verbalizes her suggestion-related imaginings and is then interviewed. During the interview, she reiterates her interpretation of suggested communications and the cognitive strategies that she employed.

The reason given for including explicit information is that it has been hypothesized that many 'poor hypnotic' subjects tend to interpret test suggestions literally and, therefore, simply wait passively for the suggested effects to 'just happen by themselves' (Spanos, 1982). Good hypnotic subjects, on the other hand, are said to respond to suggestions as implicit requests to enact the behaviours called for, whilst interpreting their enactments as involuntary occurrences. Spanos (1986) claims that it is on the basis of these ideas that the CSTP emphasizes that responses to suggestions never 'just happen': they must be enacted. Subjects are further informed that they can make their enacted responses feel involuntary by becoming highly absorbed in fantasy situations that imply involuntariness. Basically, the package emphasizes the importance of having an active interpretational set towards suggestions.

There has been a good deal of research centred around the CSTP, the majority of which has been conducted by Spanos and his colleagues. The main finding is that substantial gains in susceptibility are found in poor hypnotic subjects who had initially scored as low susceptible (Gorassini & Spanos, 1986). In one study, more than 50% of the initially poor hypnotic subjects post-tested as high in susceptibility — whereas none of the poor hypnotic subjects in the control condition post-tested high (Spanos, Robertson, Menary & Brett, 1986). Other research has shown up to 80% of initially poor subjects to score high (Spanos, Robertson, Menary, Brett & Smith, 1987). These gains were found on both objective and subjective measures of susceptibility (Spanos, Cross, Menary, Brett & de Groh, 1987). The enhancements have been shown to generalize to other tasks, with studies finding trained subjects scoring much higher on novel suggestions than untrained control subjects (Spanos, Lush & Gwynn, 1989). With regards to how long these enhancements last, evidence suggests that large susceptibility gains are maintained over intervals of at least a few months (Spanos,

DuBreuil & Gabora, 1991), the longest follow-up showing that these gains can be maintained for up to 30 months (Spanos, Cross, Menary & Smith, 1988).

Not surprisingly, the Carleton work has been the subject of strong criticism from researchers more sympathetic with the state concept of hypnosis (Hilgard, 1989). Replication attempts have not always been successful and there has been much controversy concerning whether the training promotes 'genuine' changes in hypnotic responsiveness or whether it simply promotes behavioural compliance. Bates (1990) has indicated the limitations in the Carleton work in a series of empirical studies. Although Bates agreed that the CSTP does appear to increase hypnotic responsiveness, the magnitude of the training effect obtained by his group was considerably less than that in the Carleton work (Bates, Miller, Cross & Brigham, 1988). Also these small gains in susceptibility have not been maintained at follow-up, a period of 4 months (Bates *et al*., 1988). Bates also suggested that the effect could be institution specific and that unless efforts were made to reproduce the facilitatory context existing at Carleton the magnitude of change would not be duplicated (Bates & Kraft, 1991). A further finding indicated that the gains were only in objective not subjective responsiveness, indicating that although most trained subjects were willing to enact the suggested movements, few learned to have the subjective experiences traditionally associated with hypnosis (Bates & Brigham, 1990). Thus Bates concluded that behavioural compliance may account for training gains. He argued that it was the nature of the instructions given to subjects during training that indicated that compliance was an acceptable way of responding to hypnotic suggestions. Bates (1990) also claimed that there are strong demand characteristics within the package — subjects are explicitly told that training should help them become more responsive to hypnotic suggestions. Further, Bates (1992) found that demands for honesty from trained subjects reduced the training effect and produced consistently smaller scores than a training program without these honesty instructions, indicating that demand characteristics at least contribute to the efficacy of the CSTP and suggesting that deliberate compliance to 'enact' the suggestions plays a major part.

Spanos replied to Bates' compliance argument by using simulators — subjects who are told to fake hypnosis and act like an excellent hypnotic subject. Spanos found that simulators, after training, out-performed both trained and natural highs on both objective and subjective measures (Spanos & Flynn, 1989). He concluded that sustained faking, or compliance could not adequately account for the enhancements found in hypnotizability. In a study where simulators were surreptitiously observed (Spanos, Burgess, Roncon, Wallace-Capretta & Cross, 1993), trained and natural highs exhibited the same scores with an experimenter present and absent; however the simulators exhibited lower hypnotizability with the experimenter absent and failed to adopt a hypnotic role. Again, Spanos concluded that these findings contradict the simple idea of compliant responding in trained subjects. With regards to the institution specific argument, other researchers have shown susceptibility enhancements at different universities (Gfeller, Lynn & Pribble, 1987; Robertson, McInnis & St Jean, 1992). There has also been a study where the original, group-administered, multimedia CSTP was compared to a self-administered training program, which was limited to written materials (Kirkeby, Payne, Hovanitz & Moser, 1991). It was found that the booklet program was equal in effectiveness to the original CSTP.

The present research has actually involved putting the whole training package onto videotape. The main aim of the research was to try to clarify the effects of hypnotic skills training upon the strategies and cognitive processes that are employed by hypnotic subjects. This issue was raised by Fellows and Ragg (1992) in

their preliminary British trial of the CSTP. They found support for the Carleton work; however, two initially good hypnotic subjects who decreased in responsiveness following training, were very critical of the program, saying that it encouraged them to respond quite differently from their usual manner. This suggested the possibility that different processes may be involved in natural versus acquired hypnotic suggestibility.

In order to explore, in more detail than has been attempted before, the way in which subjects perceive hypnotic suggestions a procedure known as the experiential analysis technique (EAT) has been used. The EAT was first used by Sheehan, McConkey and Cross (1978) and is a qualitative technique of inquiry that has been specifically designed to elicit information about the experiences of subjects. It is based firmly on the assumption that subjective events of hypnosis are the hallmark of the hypnotic experience. The EAT involves subjects viewing a videotape playback of their hypnotic session and commenting, to an independent inquirer, about the experiences that accompanied their hypnotic responses. Each EAT session is conducted on an individual basis and involves two stages — the hypnosis session and then the inquiry session.

In the present study, 60 students at the University of Portsmouth served as participants. These participants were selected from a sample of 113 individuals who had been assessed on the Harvard Group Scale of Hypnotic Susceptibility: Form A (Shor & Orne, 1962). Twenty participants were classified as highly susceptible, 20 were medium and 20 scored low in susceptibility. Half of these participants were then trained on the video version of the CSTP and the other half served as a control group and received no training (see Table 1).

Table 1. Experimental design

| | High susceptibility | Medium susceptibility | Low susceptibility |
|---|---|---|---|
| Trained | N = 10 | N = 10 | N = 10 |
| Control | N = 10 | N = 10 | N = 10 |

In order to determine the effect of the training, each participant was assessed twice on the EAT, both pre- and post-training; i.e., 120 EAT sessions. The EAT transcripts are presently being coded. Each participant's comments are being analysed for information concerning the processes and strategies that they employed; for example, the use of various cognitive styles and the role of imagery, absorption and involuntariness. Of particular interest are the experiences and strategies of trained good hypnotic subjects as compared to natural good hypnotic subjects. Spanos found that the two groups failed to differ on standardized scales (Spanos & Flynn, 1989), but the present research has taken the idea one step further and has investigated the variety and range of different experiences via the EAT. Our research is also looking at the strategies employed by those subjects who do not improve with training as well as those who do. Why do some people not improve after the CSTP? One reason could be, as Fellows and Ragg (1992) suggested, that the strategies suggested by the package interfere or conflict with the subjects' own strategies. It is hoped that the use of an experiential analysis technique will provide such information about this 'package' of hypnosis and the individual differences involved.

The data show that there exists a wide variety of hypnotic experiences, confirming the findings of Sheehan and McConkey (1982), and also that the CSTP is a valid

method of producing genuine susceptibility gains. The Long Stanford Scale (LSS) (Tart, 1970) was included in the hypnotic session, just before the de-induction, and preliminary statistical analysis has shown a positive training effect on this measure. The LSS asks participants to rate on a scale of 0 to 10 how hypnotized they think they are — where 0 means they feel alert and not affected by the hypnotic suggestions and 10 means that they feel very deeply hypnotized. It was hypothesized that trained participants would give higher post-training ratings than controls. A 3×2×2, susceptibility by training by time (i.e., pre- and post-), ANOVA with repeated measures was performed on the data. The trained group (mean = 3.8) did score higher than the control group (mean = 3), although this difference did not reach statistical significance ($F_{1.54} = 3.58$, $P = 0.064$). However, a highly significant two way interaction between training and time was found ($F_{1.54} = 16.69$, $P < 0.001$) (see Figure 1). Before training, no significant differences were found between the training group and the control group. However, after training, the trained group showed significantly higher scores than the controls, hence showing a positive training effect.

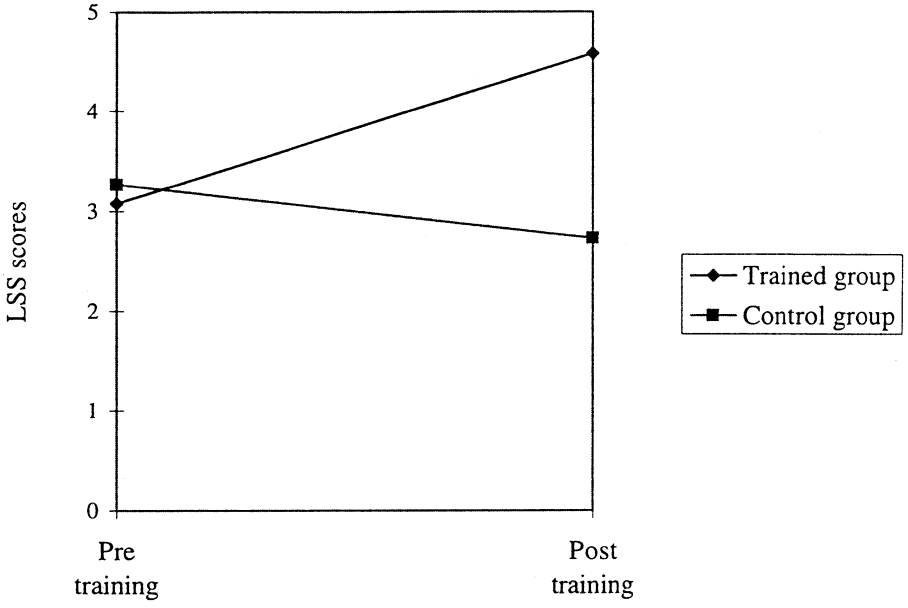


Figure 1. Long Standford Scale as a function of training and time.

With regards to the EAT data, several participants commented that with further practice and rehearsal they could envisage further changes and developments.

One participant commented:

> I can actually start to see, you know, how it could work more and more with practice. Um, I still have a problem with some of them, like not being able to say my name and stuff, but certainly it's self-evident that, you know, I've progressed really.

Another commented that:

> Whereas before you're not sure whether you should go with it or not . . . 'cos you don't know what to do . . . you don't know whether to try and resist, to try and go along or

> just try and remain neutral. But the way she [CSTP narrator] told you was to concentrate . . . she said just go along with it . . . I think you accomplish more, you get a lot more out of it.

However, as Fellows and Ragg (1992) found, there have also been a small number of participants reporting that the CSTP interfered with their natural way of responding.

With reference to a thirst hallucination, one natural highly susceptible participant commented:

> I think this is one of the ones where the training interfered with like my natural . . . I kept thinking, OK, I've got to imagine a scenario, walking along a beach or something like that, you know and in a way it was a hindrance to me because I remember doing the same thing [suggestion] last time and it really worked well on me . . . but this time it seemed as though it didn't work so well . . . it [the training] was all interfering with my natural processes . . . I don't think it helped.

As hypothesized, this could be one reason why some participants do not improve with training.

Although the EAT data are still being coded and analysed it is possible to say at this stage that there has been a positive effect of the training. The EAT is a valuable tool and has enabled several new contributions to be made; for example, the technique has never been used with either medium or low susceptible participants and has never been applied to the CSTP. The technique is certainly providing a unique and rich insight into the experience of hypnosis and hence producing a clearer idea of what is involved in becoming a good hypnotic subject.

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*Address for correspondence:*

*Victoria West,*
Department of Psychology,
University of Portsmouth,
King Charles Street,
Portsmouth,
PO1 2ER, UK.