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ON THE INEVITABILITY OF FINDING HYPNOSIS-SIMULATOR EQUIVALENCE

Peter L.N. Naish

The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

Abstract

It is argued that any study where hypnotic behaviour is brought about through suggestion must inevitably find similar behaviour in simulators. Consequently, although simulators may still have a role to play in identifying spontaneous behaviour that is unique to hypnosis, they cannot illuminate the question of how suggested experiences are generated.

Key words: cognition, hypnotic experience, socio-cognitive, time distortion

Introduction

Hilgard's (1977) Hidden Observer paradigm was an ingenious attempt at demonstrating proposed underlying mechanisms of hypnosis. Unfortunately, the explanation offered to account for the results was not the only one possible, nor probably, with the benefit of hindsight, the most parsimonious. As Green, Page, Handley and Rasekhy have demonstrated (this issue), one of a number of other possible explanations for hidden observer behaviour can be that a participant is acting the part of a hypnotized person. Thus, Green et al. have identified and filled a gap in the dense row of nails, sealing the coffin of an aspect of hypnosis. Nevertheless, it is important to be clear exactly what it is that is due for burial, because just as Hilgard read too much into his results, it is easy to read too much into their refutation.

Green et al. have demonstrated three basic facts: that simulators interpret an ideomotor and hidden observer situation similarly to those who are ostensibly hypnotized; that hypnotized people do what they believe is appropriate to their role; and that simulators tend to overplay theirs. As Green et al. point out, the last of these effects, that simulators can overact, is well known (e.g. Spanos, deGroot and Gwynn, 1987). Spanos and his co-workers (e.g. Spanos, 1986) also made it very clear that hypnotized people carry out what they are lead to believe is the normal response to hypnosis. If this latter observation is universally true, then it was to be expected that hypnotized people in this ideomotor experiment would first interpret, and then enact suggestions, in ways broadly similar to simulators. Consequently, there is nothing in these results to cause surprise.

The nature of hypnotic behaviour

There would have been far more cause for surprise, had the hypnotized participants *failed* to produce behaviour similar to the simulators, because this would have implied that they were behaving contrary to the requirements implicit in the situation. In what circumstances could that have been possible? There would seem to have been only two likely

reasons for such unlikely behaviour. The first might have been that more highly hypnotized people are less good at recognizing expectations. This implausible suggestion may be dismissed by noting that hypnotic 'highs' are, by definition, those people who detect exactly what is implicit in a suggestion, and go on to carry it out. The other reason for unexpected behaviour, had it occurred, would have been that genuinely hypnotized people produce special behaviour, intrinsic to the hypnotic condition, and independent of any suggestions. In effect, this was the hypothesis being tested: to determine whether hypnosis causes some form of dissociation, with the special property of giving privileged access by the experimenter to an entity hidden to its owner. In the twenty-first century this seems such a preposterous notion that we are not surprised to see it dismissed (although it was nonetheless appropriate to test it). However, it seems almost as strange an idea to assume that it is appropriate to test hypnosis itself by giving suggestions, then determining whether they are carried out. In the absence of any suggestions there is effectively no hypnotic behaviour: the participant remains rather passive. If more active behaviour is to be observed, then it is necessary to issue directions in some form or another. If the directions are absurd, for example suggesting that the person is 'going back in time' to a previous existence, then the observed behaviour will also be absurd, and liable to all manner of inconsistencies. Green et al. have demonstrated yet another example of absurd behaviour, and this suggests two questions: first, why would people be prepared to behave absurdly, and second, is there a better way of researching hypnosis?

We know why half of the Green et al. participants behaved absurdly: because they were, as instructed, acting out what they imagined hypnotized people would do. At one level of explanation this is also the reason for the behaviour of the remaining participants, but such an account is incomplete, because it does not explain *why* they adopt this behavioural style. To 'go along with' the absurd in this kind of way has, not unnaturally, attracted explanations couched in social psychological terms. However, these explanations tend to place their emphasis at the start of the sequence that leads from the participant's initial motivation, then on to a final experience. They focus on the unusual nature of the participant-hypnotist relationship, and the effects of beliefs and expectations, rather than fully exploring the subsequent cognitions. In the view of this author, there are many situations (for example the influence of religious or political leaders' pronouncements upon followers' behaviour) where seemingly non-rational responses can result from suggestions. In contrast, it is hard to find many examples where the sensory experiences appear to be modified to such an extent, yet under such control as in hypnosis. Consequently, I have argued (Naish, 2005) that the 'socio' element of 'socio-cognitive' is an unhelpful label. The cognitive aspect of hypnosis is the area demanding explanation, and to bring the 'social' component to the fore seems without justification.

Of course, the above recommendation to address the cognitive rather than the social is reasonable only if participants truly have the suggested experiences. This is the nub of the matter, and is very difficult to demonstrate objectively, so it is necessary to appeal to circumstantial evidence. Some is available in the observation that simulators overplay their part; from the other perspective, this may be expressed as hypnotized people failing to do as well as simulators. It is implausible that the hypnotized are intrinsically unable to simulate as enthusiastically, should they wish to, so a better explanation for their more restrained behaviour is that the underlying experiences are being honestly reported, but that they do not reach the extremes that could be imagined. This assumption, that the experiences are being genuinely described, is supported by brain-mapping studies, such as that of Szechtman, Woody, Bowers and Nahmias (1998). These researchers reported that, when participants were claiming to be experiencing hallucinations, the observed

brain activity was extremely like that resulting from true sensory stimulation. As argued above, in the context of results as startling as these it seems almost perverse to confine attention to the social context of the experiment.

A change of direction in hypnosis research

So what should be buried, as a result of the Green et al. findings? Clearly, the dissociation concept lacks life, and many aspects of the hidden observer idea are due for interment. The phenomenon itself may be genuine, in the sense that participants' reports are attempts accurately to describe subjective experiences, but it tells us nothing about the underlying mechanisms by which the experiences occur. In fact, this dismissal may be extended to all procedures, including ideomotor responses, which employ suggested behaviour as a window upon the processes. Inevitably, simulators will always be able to produce similar behaviour, and little will be revealed. So, perhaps the death knell should also be heard for all research that simply devises still more ways of demonstrating that 'highs', like simulators, do what they believe they are supposed to do.

It is bad practice to dismiss without replacement, so what should be the nature of hypnosis research? Kalio and Revonsuo (2003) have addressed this issue and, as here, recommend that it is the hypnotized person's *experience*, rather than behaviour, that should be researched. In view of this, there seems to be little role for simulators, because we know that the experiences of hypnosis, like simulators, follow the instructions. There is no point to asking *why* do they have that particular experience? The proper question is *how* do they have the experience? Since simulators do not share the experience they have nothing to contribute. Nevertheless, simulators may still have a role, if it can be shown that there are *behaviours* (not experiences) that they fail to replicate. This, of course, has been the goal (or often the 'straw man') all along, but the error has been to look for *suggested* behaviours that set them apart. As argued above, it seems inevitable that no such behaviour can ever be found. The required behaviour is one that occurs without suggestion, because then the unguided simulator will not be able to match it. Since hypnotized people produce very little distinctive behaviour without suggestion, it is not easy to find candidate material to set them apart from simulators, but the search should go on. Thus far, there seems to be only one mark of distinction: time distortion (e.g. Bowers, 1979). This appears to show that hypnosis slows the internal clock (Naish, 2001) and is not replicated by simulators (Mozenter and Kurtz, 1992).

Conclusions

The Green, Page, Handley and Rasekhy paper is a worthwhile study, reporting the use of the simulator paradigm in a hitherto untested area. However, perhaps its greatest contribution to the hypnosis literature would be if it served to mark an end to the kind of research that demonstrates equivalence between hypnosis and simulation. It is argued that simulators have value now only in the exploration of spontaneous, non-suggested, hypnotic behaviour. Aside from this, hypnosis research should be directed at elucidating the mechanisms that bring about hypnotic experiences.

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Address for correspondence:
Peter LN Naish
Department of Psychology
Briggs Building
The Open University
Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK
Email: p.naish@open.ac.uk