

TEACHING HYPNOSIS IN BRITISH PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENTS: A 10-YEAR FOLLOW-UP

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ABSTACT

An eight-item questionnaire asking about the extent and nature of hypnosis teaching and research was sent to 65 British university psychology departments as a follow-up to a previous survey conducted in 1984. Forty-seven questionnaires were returned (72%). In some cases, the questionnaire was completed by the Head of Department, to whom they were addressed, and in others by a specialist member of staff. Results showed no overall change over the 10-year period in the amount of hypnosis teaching or research. About one-third of departments reported teaching hypnosis, but this usually consisted only of an occasional lecture or seminar. As before, few departments offered students any opportunity for practical work in the subject, with some notable exceptions. Only 11 departments reported research in hypnosis. However, attitudes towards hypnosis teaching and research remained very positive, with over 80% of returns asserting that hypnosis was a suitable subject for teaching and research. The benefits and problems associated with teaching hypnosis to students are identified and discussed. One major benefit is the high level of student interest in the subject. Problems include the misconceptions of ethical committees about the subject and the absence of further training and career opportunities in clinical hypnosis for psychology graduates.

THE 1984 SURVEY

Over 10 years ago, I was planning a new final year option course on hypnosis for the BSc Psychology Degree at University of Portsmouth. To see what was happening in other psychology departments regarding the teaching of hypnosis, I constructed a simple questionnaire asking for information on, and attitudes towards, the teaching of hypnosis at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. For interest, questions were also included about research in hypnosis and about awareness of the British Society of Experimental and Clinical Hypnosis and its journal. (See Appendix for copy of the questionnaire.)

The eight-item questionnaire was sent out in April 1984 to the heads of 58 British University and Polytechnic psychology departments together with a stamped and addressed envelope. Fifty questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 86.2%. Although about one-third of departments reported the teaching of hypnosis, this usually consisted only of an occasional lecture or seminar. Only four departments gave practical instruction in hypnosis. There was certainly no full course in hypnosis of the sort that I was planning.

However, attitudes towards the teaching of hypnosis were very positive, with some three-quarters of respondents indicating that hypnosis was a suitable subject for students to learn about. But concerns were expressed over the suitability of

practical work in hypnosis, particularly at undergraduate level. Several respondents specifically indicated that while students might be taught *about* hypnosis they should not be instructed how to do it. The full results of the survey together with discussion commentaries were published in the *British Journal of Experimental and Clinical Hypnosis* (Daniels, 1985; Davies, 1985; Fellows, 1985; Gregg, 1985; Hegarty, 1985).

THE PORTSMOUTH HYPNOSIS COURSE

Despite the somewhat disappointing findings from the 1984 survey, the new hypnosis course was launched in 1986 as a final year option on the BSc Honours Degree in Psychology at the University of Portsmouth (then Portsmouth Polytechnic) and has been running successfully ever since. The course covers two academic terms and is assessed partly by coursework (either an essay or a review) and partly by a 3-hour written examination paper. It has proved to be one of the most popular options in the degree, currently with over 40 students signing up for it each year. The course is split into two parts, each of 10 weeks duration. The first part deals mainly with theoretical and research issues and the second part with the application of hypnosis in therapy, pain control and forensic work. The course is supported by a comprehensive library of specialist books and journals.*

With relatively large numbers of students, practical work is not easy to organize; however, demonstrations are given of the major phenomena and students are encouraged to try out simple induction and suggestion procedures for themselves. Feedback at the end of the course has been consistently good with most students indicating that they found the course interesting and challenging though not particularly relevant to their future careers. This is a point I would like to return to later.

THE 1994 SURVEY

The main aim of the present paper is to present the results of a 10-year follow-up survey into hypnosis teaching and research in University psychology departments. The same questionnaire as that used in the 1984 survey was sent to 65 psychology departments in the same manner as before.

Table 1 shows the number of departments replying 'Yes' to each of the eight questions in the 1984 and 1994 surveys. The response rate in the 1994 survey (72%) was lower than that in the 1984 survey (86%), but is still quite satisfactory for a postal survey. As before, questionnaires were often completed by a specialist member of staff who usually added extra details about their views and experiences.

The results indicate that little has changed over the 10-year period in the extent of either hypnosis teaching or research. Although the number of departments teaching hypnosis at undergraduate and postgraduate levels has gone up slightly the proportion of the total surveyed remains steady at about 30%. However, the postgraduate figures probably underestimate the total amount of hypnosis teaching at this level since some takes place in institutions not covered by this survey, such as, medical schools and clinical psychology departments. As in 1984, the usual means of teaching hypnosis was through the occasional lecture or seminar. Little practical work was reported apart from demonstrations of standard hypnotic susceptibility scales and supervision of undergraduate projects.

*Details of the Portsmouth hypnosis course are available from the author.

Table 1. Hypnosis Teaching and Research in British University Departments

	1984	1994
Total surveyed	58	65
Number of replies	50	47
Number of 'yes' replies to each question		
1. Undergraduate teaching?	16	19
2. Suitable for undergraduates?	35	39
3. Postgraduate teaching?	8	10
4. Suitable for postgraduates?	38	40
5. Research?	12	11
6. Suitable for research?	50	45
7. Aware of the BSECH?	37	33
8. Aware of journal of BSECH?	31	27

However, two innovative schemes were reported. In one (at the University of Leeds) undergraduates are offered three 14-hour practical hypnosis courses on a voluntary basis, outside of the degree scheme. These courses, attended by about 16 students, cover inductions of various types, deepening procedures, post-hypnotic suggestions, hypnotic phenomena and applications of a non-clinical nature. In the other (at University College London) students are introduced to the practical aspects of hypnosis in a first year laboratory class, using the Creative Imagination Scale and simple ideomotor responses.

At postgraduate level, the only substantial courses are the Diploma and MSc courses in Clinical and Applied Hypnosis offered by the University of Sheffield and University College London. These courses provide teaching and workshops on hypnotic techniques and applications to suitably qualified health care professionals. The MSc also has a research project as one of its course requirements. Apart from these courses, the only hypnosis teaching that takes place at postgraduate level involves the occasional lecture or workshop on clinical psychology and other training courses.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE TEACHING OF HYPNOSIS

As shown in Table 1, attitudes towards the teaching of hypnosis have remained positive, with over 80% of respondents considering hypnosis to be a suitable subject for teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate psychology levels. Many good reasons were given for including hypnosis on undergraduate psychology courses, including the high level of student interest in the subject. In these days where University departments are in open competition for students, the presence of hypnosis on the course is an attraction. Despite what some academics may think, students certainly see hypnosis as an interesting and integral part of the subject of psychology, which, of course, it is.

As well as being an important subject in its own right, hypnosis was also seen by many respondents as having valuable links with other areas of psychology, for example, consciousness, social influence, memory and neuropsychology. Such cross-fertilization between hypnosis and other areas also helps to make its inclusion on psychology courses more acceptable to doubting colleagues. The study of hypnosis research paradigms was also seen as useful in exemplifying methodological issues.

The study of hypnosis can also be fruitfully used as a critical exercise in the analysis of widely accepted, but often inaccurate, psychological concepts. For example, the state versus non-state controversy provides an excellent catalyst in seminars for sparking off discussions and for encouraging students to examine carefully the basis of their own conceptions about the subject. The importance of teaching students hypnosis as a skill was also emphasized by survey respondents, not only for use in later careers, but also for personal use in stressful situations.

PROBLEMS IN TEACHING HYPNOSIS

As in the earlier survey a number of problems in the teaching of hypnosis, particularly at undergraduate level, were identified by respondents. These included practical obstacles, such as the lack of time on the syllabus and absence of suitable expertise among members of staff, but also problems related more closely to the nature of the subject itself. The preconceptions or, more correctly, the misconceptions that are held about the subject by academic colleagues and, in particular, by ethics committees create major difficulties. Several respondents stressed the problems they had experienced with ethics committees, whose knowledge of hypnosis rarely extended beyond the confines of the stage show or the tabloid exposure of an incompetent hypnotherapist.

A common concern of ethics committees is the possibility of student misuse of hypnotic procedures. However, no examples of any such misuse were given by respondents and many specifically indicated that they had experienced no special problems in teaching hypnosis to undergraduates. In fact, as pointed out by Davies (1985) and Hegarty (1985) in their commentaries on the 1984 survey, students typically suffer from lack of confidence when it comes to trying out hypnotic procedures and often cannot be persuaded to use even the simplest of methods. Clearly, time needs to be taken to emphasize that hypnosis can be a profound experience for some people, and thus requires special care, and that under no circumstances should any sort of treatment be attempted. The teaching of hypnosis can be a useful way to introduce students to the ethical issues involved in research with human subjects.

A further common worry of ethics committees concerns the general risks involved in the use of hypnosis. Gregg (1984) provided a useful review of this issue in his discussion commentary on the 1984 survey paper. Drawing mainly on research from North America, he argued that though some negative sequelae are occasionally associated with the practice of hypnosis in an experimental context, they are rare and are no greater than those that students might experience in other academic activities, such as, taking part in a verbal learning experiment, or sitting in a college class. Gregg concluded that these studies help to put the risks from hypnosis into a broader perspective and should discourage overly restrictive ethical decisions concerning its use.

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES IN HYPNOSIS

As indicated above, students at Portsmouth invariably complain that the hypnosis course has little career relevance. Students often ask me about the possibility of further training in hypnosis and it is with much regret that I have to tell them that this is not possible, at least, without further training in clinical or educational psychology. As graduates with no professional experience they are not eligible to join the BSECH, or to enrol on either of the two recognized post-graduate courses in clinical hypnosis. Sadly, I also have to inform them that the various hypnotherapy training courses that they see advertised in the press, and in *The Psychologist*, do not provide

a recognized clinical training qualification. I feel inadequate and a little angry in having to say this to students who are keen to make a career in the area and, having followed the Portsmouth course, have a good academic grounding in the subject. So, they go away disappointed and somewhat mystified by our professional demarcations, knowing that they are unlikely to obtain further clinical or educational training, and leaving the field of psychology for good, which is a sad waste of talent.

I do not know the answer to this problem. However, ruling out a relaxation in the conditions of entry to the properly recognised postgraduate courses in clinical hypnosis, the best prospect for the future seems to be for more professional recognition of certain lay hypnotherapy courses.

RESEARCH IN HYPNOSIS

As shown in Table 1, relatively few departments reported research in hypnosis in either survey. However, as with postgraduate teaching, it is likely that the figures underestimate the total amount of hypnosis research in the country, as some certainly takes place outside of the university sector. Hypnosis-related research topics reported by respondents included smoking, dreams, laterality, relaxation, creativity, pain and discomfort, forensic applications, imagery, chronic fatigue, hypnotic training, and the role of context in hypnotic responding.

CONCLUSIONS

Although, as shown in this survey, attitudes towards hypnosis in British psychology departments are reasonably positive, the actual amount of teaching and research in the subject remains fairly modest. With growing public awareness of hypnotism and its therapeutic possibilities through television and the press, there is likely to be a corresponding growth in demand from students of psychology for its inclusion on their courses. However, I suspect that research and teaching will continue to remain at modest levels into the next century, kept alive, as at present, by a few enthusiasts.

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX: SURVEY OF HYPNOSIS TEACHING AND RESEARCH
IN UK PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENTS

1. Is there any teaching of hypnosis on undergraduate courses in your department?

YES NO

If YES is this teaching: (a) Lecture/s (b) Practical work (c) Seminar/s

Please give brief details and/or comments:

2. Do you think that hypnosis is a suitable subject for teaching on undergraduate courses?

YES NO

Please comment on the value and/or problems in teaching hypnosis:

3. Is there any teaching of hypnosis on postgraduate courses in your department?

YES NO

If YES is this teaching: (a) Lecture/s (b) Practical work (c) Seminar/s

Please give brief details and/or comments:

4. Do you think that hypnosis is a suitable subject for teaching on postgraduate courses?

YES NO

Comments:

5. Is there any form of research in hypnosis in your department?

YES NO

Please give brief details and/or comments:

6. Do you think that hypnosis is a suitable subject for research in psychology departments?

YES NO

Comments:

7. Are you aware of the existence of the British Society of Experimental and Clinical Hypnosis?

YES NO

Comments:

8. Are you aware of the existence of the journal *Contemporary Hypnosis* (formerly, the *British Journal of Experimental and Clinical Hypnosis*)?

YES NO

Comments: