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THE FLEXIBLE OBSERVER AN NEODISSOCIATION THEORY

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Green, Page, Handley and Rasekhy (this issue) have provided another example of what Lynn and I referred to as the flexible observer (Kirsch and Lynn, 1998), this time using a rather unusual ideomotor task. The flexible observer design involves providing hypnotized subjects with differing cues about the hidden observer. As in previous flexible observer studies, the behaviour of the hidden observer in the Green et al. study depends on cues given in the instructions used to elicit the phenomenon. In prior studies, changing instructions led to hidden observers that experienced more pain or less pain, or that perceived things normally or in reverse. In one study three hidden observers were created, one storing memories of abstract words and the other storing memories of concrete words.

At this point, the data are consistent (see citations in Green et al.'s target article) and the flexibility of the hidden observer cannot be doubted. The question that remains is this: what are the implications of these data for neodissociation theory? Here too, there is some agreement. As Green et al. note – citing John Kihlstrom's (1998) spirited support of neodissociation theory – it is generally agreed that the experiences that people have in response to suggestions are 'affected by expectancies, motivations, and how participants interpret the hypnotist's communications'. Therefore, showing that hidden observer reports vary with instructions does not disprove neodissociation theory. It does, however, leave it resting on pure speculation without an evidential base.

Why is the flexibility of the hidden observer a problem for neodissociation theory? The answer is that according to neodissociation theory, hidden observers are present whenever hypnotized individuals experience suggested effects. According to Hilgard (1986), the function of hidden observer instructions is not to create a division in consciousness (i.e. the hidden observer), but to reveal the division that has been produced by suggestions for arm levitation, arm immobilization, pain reduction, amnesia, and the like. But if this is the case, then the nature of the revealed hidden observer should depend on the type of suggestion that is given (i.e. ideomotor, challenge, analgesia, amnesia, etc.), not on differences in the wording of hidden observer instructions (i.e. 'When 1 touch your shoulder, I will be speaking to a hidden part of you'). An ideomotor suggestion, for example, should produce a hidden observer that is aware of intentionally making the movement.

Flexible observer data present a serious unanswered challenge to the assumption that hidden observer reports reflect a division of consciousness that occurs whenever a suggested effect is experienced, and without this assumption, neodissociation theory is left without an evidential base. If hidden observers are produced by the instructions used to elicit them rather than by the suggestions for the effects that neodissociation theory is supposed to explain, then there is no evidence for the hypothesized division of consciousness that is supposed to underlie the experience of hypnotic suggestions. The absence of data does not indicate that a hypothesis is false, but neither does it provide any evidence supporting the theory, and it does undermine the empirical foundation of

neodissociation theory. So the discovery that hidden observers may simply be suggested effects undermines the claim that they are the fundamental source of hypnotic phenomena.

On the other hand, the flexible observer phenomenon does not provide specific support for any particular alternative to neodissociation theory. It can be explained by any theory that recognizes the impact of social factors like motivation and expectancy, which, as noted, is just about every theory.

At this point, the flexibility of the hidden observer can be taken as well established. Nevertheless, it would be nice to see one more study. What would happen if the hidden observer were applied to a classical ideomotor suggestion, such as arm levitation? Would the hidden observer, given typical hidden observer instructions to be more aware, report intentionally lifting the arm? If so, this might constitute disconfirmatory data for another variety of dissociation theory, namely, dissociated control theory (Bowers, 1992), because according to dissociated control theory, the arm is not being raised intentionally by any part of consciousness. Instead, it has come under the direct control of the hypnotist's suggestion.

References

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