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WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SOCIAL IN CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS OF HYPNOSIS?

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Abstract

Historically and continuing into the present, the field of hypnosis has been divided into proponents of 'state' or 'special-state' and 'non-state' or 'sociocognitive' accounts of hypnosis. Although many investigators now dispute this distinction, it can still be used as a rough guide to views of the phenomenon. The sociocognitive view, at least in the last 20 years, has emphasized social and cognitive processes in the explanation of hypnosis and its effects, but increasingly – and consistent with social cognition in general – the social too has been theorized in cognitive terms. This paper reviews these theoretical developments with the aim of exploring the implications of the loss of the social in 'non-state' accounts. As a historical, cultural and ultimately social phenomenon, at what cost is hypnosis reduced to its strictly cognitive dimensions? Copyright © 2008 British Society of Experimental & Clinical Hypnosis. Published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: hypnosis, state, nonstate, sociocognitive theory, social psychological accounts

Practically since 'hypnosis' became a named phenomenon, attempts to explain it have incorporated social relations to varying degrees. R.W. White (1941) is frequently cited as the inspiration for a variety of accounts that seem to take the social seriously, such as those developed by the late twentieth-century generation of hypnosis researchers, including Ted Barber, Martin Orne and Ted Sarbin, as well as the generation that followed them – Nick Spanos, John Chaves, Bill Coe, Graham Wagstaff and John Kihlstrom (e.g. Spanos and Chaves, 1991). Interestingly, however, it seems to be the social that regularly either goes missing in favour of other explanations such as an altered state of consciousness (in the case of 'state' theorists) or is transformed into something else, such as cognitions. Although our concern with the social is clearly aligned with the 'non-state' position on the 'state-non-state' debate, we are not going to address that in this paper. Indeed, there has been ongoing debate regarding the foundations for such a debate, with a variety of researchers arguing that the two positions have at least some points of convergence (e.g. Spanos and Barber, 1974; Wagstaff, 1981; Kirsch and Lynn, 1995) and others offering a cautionary note regarding the many presumed similarities (e.g. Chaves, 1997; Kihlstrom, 1997). Common ground, it is often argued, can be found in the cognitivism apparent in contemporary accounts. In this paper we will focus on hypnosis as a social phenomenon – what that means and what is lost when the social is

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omitted or minimized – emphasizing those accounts that have historically been associated with the social.

What has 'the social' meant for those who emphasize the social psychological in their theoretical accounts of hypnosis? Here is what Nick Spanos had to say in his last book, *Multiple Identities and False Memories: A Sociocognitive Perspective*, published posthumously in 1996:

> [T]he idea that hypnosis is an altered state of consciousness that enables people to have unusual experiences and to do things that they could not normally do is a powerful cultural myth that exerts a strong hold on the modern imagination. This mythology includes the ideas that hypnotic suggestions can cause people to become temporarily blind or deaf,… These taken-for-granted cultural beliefs about hypnosis are now known to be wrong… Moreover, most of them have been known to be wrong for over 30 years…Nevertheless, these beliefs persist and are often perpetuated by some of the researchers investigating hypnotic phenomena and many clinicians who regard hypnosis as an unusual altered state with special therapeutic properties…the term *hypnosis* refers not to a state or condition of the person but to the historically rooted conceptions of hypnosis and hypnotic responding that are held by the participants in the mini-drama that is labeled the hypnotic situation. (pp. 18–19)

According to this account then, the social context enables 'hypnosis' to be a recognized as an intelligible phenomenon. Indeed, the question is whether hypnosis exists in any sense outside of a socio-cultural context.

Historical accounts that trace the evolution of hypnosis from demonic possession to mesmerism to hypnosis, as it came to be understood in the twentieth century (e.g. Spanos and Gottlieb, 1979; Spanos and Chaves, 1991; Gauld, 1992; Kihlstrom, 2002; Waterfield, 2002), locate the developing conceptualization of hypnosis within a complex set of historical circumstances. Importantly, it is this history that renders hypnosis meaningful to twenty-first century participants, whether they are research 'subjects', therapist clients, researchers or clinicians. Indeed, for hypnosis to occur, a social context that is recognized by all participants as a 'hypnotic situation' has to be created. All participants must share a similar understanding of what hypnosis is, how it is produced and what effects can be expected. Assuming such shared understanding and willingness to participate, the subject of the hypnotic intervention draws on the mundane skills, abilities, and knowledge they use in other situations to literally 'create the subjective experiences called for by suggestions' (Spanos, 1996: 20). Thus, an adequate theoretical account of hypnosis ought to include the social psychological. What this means is quite another story of course, for creating the subjective experiences required is not a matter of making it up as you go along but implies a theory of just what human skills and capacities exist.

A brief recent history of the social psychological accounts of hypnosis that have been advanced and defended from the mid-twentieth century onwards provides a relatively consistent pattern of formulating the *social*, but then focusing attention on that which is distinctly not social. For example, Ted Barber's early attempts to develop a theory of hypnosis emphasized the definition of the situation as hypnosis, positive attitudes towards hypnosis and the motivation to follow the researcher's instructions (e.g. Barber and Calverley, 1963; Barber, 1969). Informed by the behaviourist tradition within psychology and its reliance on a neo-positivist epistemology of experimentation, the social was conceptualized in quantifiable, individual and 'observable' terms. His 'mature', three-dimensional theory of hypnosis continued to include the social context in which hypnosis occurs, but emphasized the three types of 'very good hypnotic subjects' who, he argued become particularly responsive to hypnotic suggestion by virtue of their specific life

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histories (Barber, 1999a, 1999b). This attempt to consolidate four decades of controversy and research into a single theoretical framework was ambitious indeed, but in effect, placed personality attributes as a prior and necessary condition for effective hypnotic suggestion. Admittedly, he added three more dimensions that incorporated social psychological aspects into his proposed paradigm: (1) the social dimension of psychological experiments, including rules, roles, and expectations – 'demand characteristics' to be controlled and minimized; (2) the hypnotist's characteristics – 'skill, charisma, wisdom and effectiveness in communicating with and profoundly influencing the subject' (Barber, 1999b: 126); and (3) the instructions and suggestions, which interact with the type of subject:

> Instead of one undifferentiated, unidimensional hypnosis, we have to now think in terms of three hypnoses: the hypnosis of the fantasy-prone person which involves essentially the same state of consciousness as absorption in realistic fantasy; the hypnosis of the amnesia-prone person which has sleep-like characteristics with apparent automaticity followed by amnesia; and the hypnosis of the positively set person which involves a not particularly uncommon state of consciousness characterized by 'mental relaxation', 'letting go' and 'going with the flow'. (p. 125)

In this unificationist account of hypnosis, the social characteristics of the hypnotic context become mere enabling conditions or the distal cause for the responsiveness of particular kinds of hypnotic subjects. Yet in effect, it created a multiplicity of 'hypnoses' that were neither supported by research nor conceptually satisfying.

As the next generation of 'non-state' theorists, Nick Spanos and John Chaves were influenced by both Barber and Sarbin (e.g. Spanos, 1996). Nevertheless, in developing a sociocognitive account of hypnosis, they too emphasized the cognitive or other individual characteristics over the social, emphasizing the proximal over the distal (Sarbin, 2005). With his background in sociology and ethnomethodology, Nick Spanos understood the sociological traditions that are so integral to Ted Sarbin's theorizing and drew on them in his writing, while simultaneously, and in contradiction to these traditions, also conducting empirical research premised on the cognitive tradition. It is the latter that we critique here. Ultimately, his sociocognitive view is reductive in its premise that 'people are sentient agents continually involved in organizing sensory inputs into meaningful categories or schemas that are used to guide actions' (Spanos, 1991: 326). For example, in discussing hypnotic subjects' reports that they experience their responses to hypnotic suggestion as involuntary, he used a pain study to illustrate 'that both hypnotic and nonhypnotic analgesia result from the goal-directed cognizing of active agents, as well as…that reports of involuntary analgesia are not intrinsic to hypnotic responding, but instead reflect schema-based interpretations of goal-directed action' (Spanos and Katsanis, 1989, cited in Spanos, 1991: 329). In this study, participants in the hypnosis conditions rated themselves as more deeply hypnotized than participants in the non-hypnosis conditions, but suggestion wording was the critical independent variable – participants, both hypnotic and non-hypnotic, rated their pain reductions and coping strategies as automatic and effortless when the suggestions, both hypnotic and non-hypnotic, were passively worded. The theoretical leap Nick made, based on this research example and many others, is from participants' self-reports to participants' cognitions, aiming toward 'a more general theory of social action' (p. 355). In highlighting the role of cognitions, he effectively ignored the meaning of hypnosis, both in terms of its socio-historical significance and individual participants' understandings, as well as the meaning of the research context. How did those active agents make sense of their participation in

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a psychology experiment in the laboratory of a well-known hypnosis researcher, in an experimental condition where they received either a hypnotic or non-hypnotic suggestion, and were exposed to a pain stimulus? Certainly, they were asked how hypnotized they felt, whether their experience felt voluntary or involuntary, what they were thinking while they were exposed to the pain stimulus, and whether their reactions to the pain stimulus felt voluntary or involuntary. Yet, participants' self-reports of pain and analgesia experiences were taken to reflect invisible, psychological processes, i.e. cognitions and schema, while the complex set of social relations that enabled these responses remain invisible in the research report. The recognition that participants' actions are goal-directed is undermined by the reductive move to cognitions and away from the social relations that produce those self-reports.

In theorizing about hypnosis in the final years of his career, John Chaves continued to refer to the social psychological and to emphasize the cognitive. In the entry he wrote for the *Encyclopedia of Psychology* in 2000, he referred to the 'social-cognitive-behavioral perspective' and identified the 'important questions' as 'the attitudes, expectations, and beliefs of good hypnotic subjects, how to modify hypnotic behavior by changing these variables, and how to understand the cognitive changes that characterize high levels of hypnotizability' (p. 214). This perspective however leads to an interesting paradox. While noting that popular views on hypnosis include dated nineteenth-century notions, e.g. that the hypnotized person becomes an automaton, John also argued that these misconceptions became problematic in the clinical context and could interfere with responsiveness to hypnotic suggestion. Successful response to hypnosis requires the active participation of the individual, and therefore, those who sit passively and wait for the hypnotist to take Svengali-like control over them would be unsuccessful. Yet, the possibility of proposing to use hypnosis as a clinical tool rests on the historical claims regarding what hypnosis is and what happens to people who are hypnotized. In effect, this type of theoretical manoeuvering, which was not unique to John, selectively trades on the socio-cultural meanings of hypnosis without explicitly acknowledging them.

The next generation of hypnosis scholars, including Graham Wagstaff, Irv Kirsch, and Steve Lynn, also privilege the cognitive in their accounts of hypnosis. Wagstaff's earliest work on hypnosis included an interest in compliance as an explanation for hypnotic responding. However, in his 1981 book, he argued that hypnosis might be a 'collection of phenomena' attributable to different causes (p. 220). In a later paper, where he defined hypnosis as a type of suggestion, he noted that the meaning of hypnosis could be tailored to the individual client, as

> a state of alertness, or relaxation and drowsiness; a state of focused concentration or a state of diffused attention; a state of decreased suggestibility or a state of increased suggestibility; a state of uninhibited, uncritical imaginative involvement, or one of critical, analytical, convergent thought, and so on. (Wagstaff, 1998: 162)

He rooted this definition of hypnosis in the conviction that social influence and cognitive processes underlie the specifics of the hypnotic experience with part of the evidence marshalled to support this view derived from studies of physiological measures taken during hypnotic responding. A similar emphasis on the cognitive can be seen in the theoretical accounts proposed by Steve Lynn and Irv Kirsch over their prolific careers. Response expectancy theory (Kirsch, 1985), the integrative model of hypnosis (Lynn and Rhue, 1991), and response set theory (Kirsch and Lynn, 1997) formulate hypnosis and hypnotic responding largely within cognitive terms. In addition and consistent with the history of hypnosis research, as cognitive-neuroscience has started to compete with

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strictly cognitive or strictly neuroscience approaches to topics in psychology, there seems to be growing interest in a cognitive neuroscience of hypnosis (e.g. Jamieson, 2007). This trend will likely replace the interest in biological correlates of hypnosis that have been an integral aspect of the field since its inception. Not surprisingly, as goes psychology, so goes hypnosis research. Again, little remains of the social as socio-historical, cultural and relational.

Although we have chosen to concentrate our critical appraisal on those figures most aligned with a non-state position, it should be noted that an appreciation of the social psychological is not absent from the work of those generally associated with what was at one time clearly labelled the state position. Specifically, Martin Orne's (1962) classic contribution on the 'social psychology of the psychological experiment' had widespread influence. His hypnosis research emphasized the need to separate 'artifact' from 'essence' (Orne, 1959), and like many state researchers who came after him, he aimed to uncover the special nature of hypnosis, less visible than the social psychological processes associated with 'artifact'. John Kihlstrom stands out as a high-profile, newer generation proponent of the state position, obviously influenced by Orne, but also embedding his work within a cognitive framework (e.g. Kihlstrom, 2003, 2005). He too reserves a place for what is ultimately a vague conception of the 'social':

> The 'third way' in hypnosis research construes hypnosis simultaneously as both a state of (sometimes) profound cognitive change, involving basic mechanisms of perception, memory, and thought, *and* as a social interaction, in which hypnotist and subject come together for a specific purpose within a wider sociocultural context. A truly adequate, comprehensive theory of hypnosis will seek understanding in both cognitive and interpersonal terms. (Kihlstrom, 2005: 37)

Of course, Kihlstrom's research programme concentrated on the cognitive changes presumed to take place within the social context of hypnosis, and he has defended the need to understand cognitive processes in order to adequately understand hypnotic responding (e.g. Kihlstrom, 2003).

Ted Sarbin remains a unique figure in the recent history of hypnosis. He influenced our own research on hypnosis, and the evolution of his analysis of hypnosis runs parallel to the evolution of our theoretical stance on psychology (including hypnosis). Sarbin's stance on the *social* has been consistently more radical and, consequently, more marginalized than any of the other accounts that purport to take the social seriously. He influenced Ted Barber, and consequently, an entire generational line of non-state researchers. Yet, he stands out as an exception to the overall tendency within the field of hypnosis to reconceptualize the *social* in non-social terms. While there are many points of agreement between Sarbin, Barber, Spanos and Chaves, Sarbin's evolving role theory consistently placed the social psychological in the foreground (Sarbin, 1950, 1954, 1980, 1998; Sarbin and Allen, 1968; Sarbin and Coe, 1972). In concluding his 'Fifty Year Perspective', Sarbin (1991: 13) offered the following:

> [S]elf-reports are not reflections of mysterious mental states but can be located in the wider context of self-narratives where subjects are seen as agents of their actions, as doers, as performers. Their actions are not prompted by unknowable forces, but are performed for *reasons*.

Our debt to Sarbin is evident in this paper, where we adopt a 'rhetoric of criticism' to argue against both 'the rhetoric of mystery' evident in hypnosis scholarship adopting a

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'state' position and 'the rhetoric of positivist science' evident in hypnosis scholarship adopting a sociocognitive perspective (Sarbin, 1993). Moreover, his social constructionist position and turn to language as a means of exploring the hypnotic context and hypnotic responses (e.g. Sarbin, 1997, 2002 and 2005) fits well with our theoretical interests.

In order to make sense of the fundamentally social nature of hypnosis, we need to be clear that we do *not* mean by 'the social' just another variable or additive attribute to be taken into account after considering intra-individual capacities and skills. Throughout the history of psychology, a variety of intellectual moves have been used to isolate the question of what is social about psychological phenomena by assuming that a thorough account of human psychological processes can be achieved only by way of strictly functional, neuro-cognitive explanatory terms. We have no space here to build up the foundations of this argument, save to acknowledge that is it neither just ours nor particularly new, but has been part of the minority tradition in psychology for the better part of a century. Beginning with Mead and Vygotsky, through to the linguistic turn (heavily influenced by Wittgenstein) and contemporary positions inspired by ethnomethodology and social constructionism (including Harré's 'second cognitive revolution'), the psychological features of greatest interest are those that characterize the manner in which personhood is established through the appropriation of a language. This in turn allows the speaker of a natural language to reproduce the most important features of their communal context. Becoming a person is to engage in a process of selectively privatizing (in Vygotsky's sense of internalization) the collective symbolic processes of the culture in which one is enmeshed (Harré, 1998). Furthermore, the collective practices, which make possible the membership of the individual in the community, are not appropriated in a blind or automatic fashion, a theme that was rejected with the demise of behaviourism. Whereas the cognitive turn in psychology has emphasized almost exclusively the internal operations of this process, it has seemingly missed the features by which persons become members of local communities and, especially, by which their membership in a community acts as a precondition for their participation in, and status as persons (see for example, Harré, 1983; Bruner, 1991; Valsiner and Van der Veer, 2000; Harré and Moghaddam, 2003; Stam, 2004).

Theorists of hypnosis, particularly Sarbin and Spanos, have at various points in their respective thinking taken aspects of these positions and developed their consequences for understanding hypnotic phenomena. Although we are tempted to say that by now they are well understood, in fact we continue to be astonished at the degree to which these positions are misrepresented and made to appear as variants of one or another theorist's own personal favourite position. As a consequence, these positions, so fruitful precisely because they locate hypnotic phenomena in real world interactions, have been thoroughly marginalized. What goes by the name 'sociocognitive' is frequently no more than a functionalist thesis about the presumed functions or internal workings of the hypnotized person. These abstract categories, for example, the notion of 'hypnotizability', are objects of investigation called into existence only by virtue of the procedures used to create them. They do not resemble the kinds of objects of investigation one might find in typical natural science studies, where the status of an object is normally independent of the procedures used to obtain them. (There are many exceptions to this, but it does not affect the point we wish to make, and it would take us too far afield to note them here.) As an object of investigation, therefore, these kinds of functional entities (of which there are very many in the social sciences) are perfunctory and temporary way stations on the road to a complete explanation (see also Danziger, 1990). For they are incomplete by virtue of the promissory note they carry – in and of themselves, they are

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not explanations in a traditional sense but promise eventually to provide a reductive account. Short of this promissory note, they would in fact be referring to dualist properties, functions that float above the physical features. For what is 'hypnotizability' short of a mysterious immaterial attribute, if it were not tied in some way to material properties? Hence the endless pursuit in research for functional, abstract categories and neuroscientific correlates. But the correlates themselves will never provide the explanation for hypnotic phenomena, since such phenomena take their 'sense' and their explanatory relevance from the world of lived experience. That is, for anyone to make sense of hypnotic phenomena she must already be an apt member of the community in which such phenomena exist. The object of investigation, hypnosis in this instance, is a relevant attribute of (some) human communities, the presence of which can only be determined by the meaningful activities of the members of that community.

Perhaps this is not controversial at all, in so far as what we have said here is a straightforward critique of the nature of variables, functional explanations (broadly conceived), and the social scientific research enterprise. What matters to explanations of hypnosis is that such explanations are never exhausted by a functional account. More important however is that the adherence to such explanations for the better part of 100 years has prevented substantial progress in accounting for hypnotic phenomena. For the kinds of functional explanations favoured by the hypnosis research community do not take either the experience of those who are 'hypnotized' seriously enough (beyond some obvious measures of 'absorption' and the like, turning experience into functions and variables), nor are they serious about precisely what objects they are investigating. That is, as we have noted already, hypnosis and the multiple variables associated with the research literature (e.g. hypnotizability, hypnotic amnesia, hypnotic analgesia, and so on) are defined by the procedures used to elicit them, and hence remain elusive as objects of investigation. They are never given a realist footing in the same sense that we normally expect a realist footing from an explanation for the structure of a protein, a virus or the Milky Way. Before the critical reader raises the case of theoretical physics however and the nature of explanations proffered there, let us remind them of the mathematical rigour that allows such entities as quantum mechanics to come into serious discussions of the physical sciences. In fact, it is only through the interpretation of the mathematics involved that a quantum mechanical system can be understood at all, which is after all not the case in psychology.

We have come a long way very quickly to confront what is the crucial question in explanations of hypnosis: is there a way to avoid epiphenomenalism on the one hand and reductionism on the other hand in giving a genuine social footing to explanations of hypnosis? That is, can there be an explanation of hypnotic phenomena that does not take them to be the byproducts of a 'system' whose properties are to be explained entirely by way of a series of abstract variables that have a vague relationship to experience and language? Likewise, is the only alternative to this a reductionist account that seeks to find its explanatory leverage in the languages of the neurosciences? If we take as a starting point that the phenomena of hypnosis cannot be accounted for in strictly infrapsychological terms and that any observer must be an apt participant in the practices under investigation, then our account of hypnosis can only be understood within human linguistic and cultural practices (see Margolis, 1984, for a related argument). In this case, we are back to both Sarbin (e.g. 2005) and Spanos (e.g. 1996), who have, in fact, at various times worked with this tradition.

We have already acknowledged Sarbin's contributions to this tradition, but let us say a few words about Nick Spanos and the various ways in which he theorized his work.

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In his bestselling work on multiple identities, Spanos (1996) argued that there was a certain commonality of enactments of multiple identities across cultures despite their often dramatic differences. How does one account for such regularities across cultures and history? For Nick 'each culture develops its own indigenous theory of multiple-identity enactments' (p. 301). There is a sense in which this is correct, namely that there must be an implicit knowledge of the acceptable, the doable and the perceptible in order for hypnotic-like phenomena to take place. On the other hand, like the 'theories of mind' attributed to children, it is unlikely that people have full-fledged 'theories' of such things as much as they have practical skills and implicitly recognizable capacities that provide the limits of such experiences. For example, we no longer expect those who are hypnotized to demonstrate the same phenomena as their nineteenth-century equals, even if there is a certain degree of similarity. This is understood not just as a feature of the experiences itself, but the experience, for example, of clairvoyance during hypnosis would simply not make sense in the way it did 150 years ago. It would be viewed as strange or odd or perhaps 'made up' in some way, if the hypnotized now claimed to be able to suddenly read others' minds.

One of the standard counter arguments to all such accounts of hypnosis has been the notion that individual differences must surely demonstrate that there are no fixed social factors at work: hence the need to look 'inside' the person and to postulate functional categories. Unfortunately, psychology has made it difficult to think about individual differences as anything but 'differences'. The assessment, personality and clinical literatures, by focusing on differences, have valorized the functional account that minimizes the contextual. For individual differences are ultimately composed of complex sets of *practices*. Those practices are lost to us when we 'measure' individual 'differences' using standard tools of assessment, including the use of scales and the like. This is because a person filling out such a scale does not engage in the kinds of activities described on those scales, but necessarily limits their response to a set of descriptions already decided upon by the creator of the scale itself. Even those responding to behavioural items or imaginal items on a hypnotic susceptibility scale are engaged in a preset staging of events, not a genuine experiential context. A social approach to hypnosis would take such practices at face value and attempt to understand the manner in which they are accomplished. In that sense, it would be better to view hypnosis as an *achievement* that is accomplished both personally and interpersonally (see Kidder, 1972, for a research example that is both relevant and one of a kind). The impoverished theoretical frameworks used to explain the phenomena at hand have radically limited the empirical adequacy of research in hypnosis. We believe it is time to break open the conceptual straightjacket anew.

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