



Definition of Hypnosis

Since the early history of hypnosis, serious investigators have attempted to define and describe the phenomenon within the scientific constructs and understandings of the day. In the 18th century the German born physician, Dr. Franz Anton Mesmer, defined the phenomenon we refer to today as hypnosis in terms of a magnetic force or “fluid” which was thought to pervade the universe and be vital to physical health and wellness. Imbalances in this fluid, referred to as animal magnetism, were thought to cause diseases which could be cured by restoring the patient’s magnetic balance by passing magnets over the body, or by a powerful healer who could transmit magnetic energy through physical touch or through a series of complex hand passes made over the body. Even trees and inanimate devices, once magnetized by a healer, were thought to be capable of conveying animal magnetism to effect physical cures (Ellenberger, 1970).

In 1784, Mesmer’s animal magnetism theory was investigated by the French Academy of Science. The commission, while not denying the effectiveness of Mesmer’s methods, helped to further shape how the phenomena of hypnosis would come to be understood. They were able to debunk the theory of animal magnetism and concluded instead that the results obtained were better explained in terms of the patient’s beliefs, motivation and heated imagination.

The term hypnotism as such is generally attributed to an early 19th century Scottish physician James Braid who initially considered hypnosis to be a form of “nervous sleep”. Although “hypnotism” was derived from the ancient Greek word hypnos, meaning sleep, Braid, later came to understand that hypnosis was not synonymous with sleep, but rather a state of consciousness somewhere between wakefulness and sleep characterized by concentrated and sustained attention (Braid, 1853)

Scientific studies of hypnosis during the ensuing years have shown that, hypnosis is actually an alert state of conscious awareness (Hull, 1933). Nonetheless, the term hypnosis remains in use, while scientific inquiry continues to work toward a clearer understanding and more concise definition of the phenomenon associated with hypnosis.

In an effort to advance research and clinical practice in hypnosis, the Society of Psychological Hypnosis, Division 30 of the American Psychological Association (APA), has appointed several blue ribbon committees to come up with a definition of hypnosis consistent with developments in our scientific understanding of the phenomena (1993, 2003, and 2014).

Developing a broadly accepted definition of hypnosis, however, has proven particularly challenging because the nature and mechanisms underlying the effects of hypnosis are still not fully understood, which has led naturally to widely differing theories and disagreements within the hypnosis community (Elkins, et.al.). Thus, the first attempt (Kirsch, 1994) by the APA committee was criticized by some for being too theoretically

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biased (privileging the social-cognitive perspective while omitting reference to the “state” concept of hypnosis), too lengthy and, too restrictive, by including a limited listing of possible clinical applications of hypnosis.

In 2002, a second APA committee was tasked to develop a new definition to address the criticisms of the 1993 definition. However, that definition too was criticized for being too narrow from a theoretical perspective (e.g., omitting any reference to states of consciousness or that hypnosis can occur spontaneously), and generally lacking coherence and parsimony (Elkins, et.al., 2014)

The most recent 2014 APA Hypnosis Definition Committee’s formulation (Elkins, Barabasz, Council, & Spiegel) was developed to provide a concise definition as free as possible from theoretical bias and inclusive enough to allow for alternative theories of how the mechanisms that underlie hypnosis might operate. As such, the definition was intended to be heuristic, neither optimal nor perfect, but sufficient for the purpose of guiding research and clinical practice in hypnosis (Elkins,et.al., 2014)

The 2014 APA Committee defined the terms hypnosis, hypnotic induction, hypnotizability and hypnotherapy separately.

- **Hypnosis:** “A state of consciousness involving focused attention and reduced peripheral awareness characterized by an enhanced capacity for response to suggestion”. As such, the current definition distinguishes hypnosis from the many rituals and ceremonies that may be used to produce it.
- **Hypnotic Induction :** “A procedure designed to induce hypnosis”
- **Hypnotizability:** “An individual’s ability to experience suggested alterations in physiology, sensations, emotions, thoughts, or behavior during hypnosis”. Defining hypnotizability separately also conveys the implication that the capacity to experience hypnosis varies within the population at large.
- **Hypnotherapy:** The use of hypnosis in the treatment of a medical or psychological disorder or concern”. The new definition thus distinguishes hypnosis per se, from the use of hypnotic procedures to leverage a wide variety treatment modalities.

References

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