In a recent article on the nature of hypnosis, Evans (2000) lists my name with that of Clark L. Hull as one of two past influential authorities on the subject who have allegedly taken (Weitzenhoffer, 1953) the position that hypnosis is just a form of suggestibility, presumably implying it is nothing more than that. Evans points out this is an oversimplification and adds that recent authorities agree hypnosis is a more complex phenomenon. I appreciate Evans giving me this much recognition, but I do wish he had been more accurate regarding my position on the matter. Not only I did not take such a position in 1953, but I made the point hypnosis was, indeed, a more complex phenomenon (Weitzenhoffer, 1953, page 252-259, 257). And, inasmuch as Evans mentions his belief that dissociation must be taken into account as a factor, I would add that in 1953, long before E.R. Hilgard came up with his dissociation hypothesis, I clearly hypothesized (pp.253ff) that when hypnosis is present some form of dissociation is involved along with the increase in suggestibility. Of course Pierre Janet (1889) had anticipated both of us in this regard by many years.

Evans is not the only one to have misrepresented my original views on hypnosis. Over the years quite a few other writers have done the same and I feel that maybe it is time, while I can still do it, to correct this false impression.

The matter is somewhat of a puzzle. Where have readers of my 1953 work gotten the idea that I once considered, and presumably still consider, hypnosis to be nothing more than a state of suggestibility? Was it the title of the book: Hypnotism: An Objective Study in Suggestibility? It seems to have been for some. It should not have been. In 1953 the term “hypnotism” and “hypnosis” were still understood to denote distinct objects of thought. Hypnosis was a state of being differing from the normal waking state. Hypnotism was the production, study and use of hypnotic phenomena. My choice of title was simply intended to indicate that my topic was what hypnotism then denoted and that, for the most part, the subject matter appeared to boil down mostly to the effects of suggestion rather than those of hypnosis, the state. It did not occur to me that anyone would interpret the title as saying that hypnosis, the state, was being reduced to being merely and only a state of suggestibility.

But hopefully, Evans as well as others who have understood me to say hypnosis was just suggestibility, must have done more than look at the title of the book. So
from where in it could they have further gotten this idea? Was it from the definition I started out with on the first page of the first chapter? There, quoting Warren (1934), whose definition I tentatively accepted, I wrote,

HYPNOSIS: ... An artificially induced state, usually (though not always) resembling sleep, but physiologically distinct from it, which is characterized by heightened suggestibility, and as a result of which certain sensory, motor and memory abnormalities may be induced more readily than in the normal state. (p. 3)

Certainly, to be characterized by something is not necessarily to be construed as an identity with it. Furthermore, what is characteristic is not that hypnosis is associated with suggestibility, but with a heightening of; that is, a quantitative change in it. The significance of this lies in the fact, recognized as far back as 1860 by Liebeault and first expounded upon at length by Bernheim (1884), that the normal state of wakefulness is also associated with varying degrees of suggestibility. Accordingly, for one thing, normal wakefulness can also be said to be characterized by suggestibility. But also, this being so, the qualification of a heightening becomes an important differentiating factor. It is one of the few features amenable to empirical verification. In any event, I also believe that it is perfectly good English usage, although less accurate, to also assert on this basis that normal waking as well as hypnosis are states of suggestibility without this implying either one is intrinsically nothing more than suggestibility.

But if there should still be any doubt regarding my position in 1953 in this regard, let the reader go to page 252 of the book. Having discussed how, starting with an individual’s normal, nonhypnotic, suggestibility, homoaction and heteroaction in the form of abstract conditioning might account for some of the increase in suggestibility said to characterize hypnosis, I go on to say, “One might hope that homoaction and conditioning fully account for the nature of hypnosis. Unfortunately this does not appear to be so at present.”

From there I point out, as Evans does now more than fifty years later, that viewing hypnosis as merely a condition associated with hypersuggestibility is an oversimplification. Having done so, I hypothesize that hypnosis is also characterized by a dissociation of awareness and must be seen as an altered state of awareness associated with hypersuggestibility. And, on page 259, I clearly hypothesize that the hypersuggestibility associated with hypnosis is the result of quite different processes than those responsible for the alteration of awareness that is also associated with it. I would also call attention to a diagram on page 257 that again makes it quite clear that in 1953 I neither viewed hypnosis, nor the production of hypnotic phenomena, as just a matter of suggestibility.

So much for my views in 1953. But even had I not made these points and indeed had said quite bluntly in 1953, “Hypnosis is nothing more than a state of suggestibility” might I not have changed my mind during the next fifty years or so? Had this been the case, I would see nothing wrong in Evans as well as others stating this was my view in 1953, but should they not have a responsibility to point out this was no longer my view, as clearly my paper of 1980 Hypnotic susceptibility revisited shows? I find it hard to believe that Evans would be unfamiliar with it. In any case,
there have been other more recent major writings on my part that can hardly leave any doubts regarding the matter (Weitzenhoffer, 1989, 2000).

In brief then, I have never to this day maintained that hypnosis, the state, was nothing more than suggestibility. The evidence for this is clearly there for any one to read. I do hold, however, that during the last century suggestion appears to have been the principal agent through which hypnotic phenomena have been produced.

And, lest it be misconstrued that the theoretical model I advanced in 1953 is the one to which I still ascribe, I will add the following: My position today (Weitzenhoffer, 2000) is that any theorizing regarding hypnosis has been and continues to be premature. There is still much empirical groundwork to be done before anything fruitful of the sort can be accomplished. Today I have little in the line of a theory—just a few hypotheses which are insufficient to account for all of the facts that have been satisfactorily established.

References


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