Theodore Xenophon Barber

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Theodore Xenophon Barber, one of the most productive and influential scholars in the field of hypnosis, died on September 10, 2005. He was 78 years old and was affiliated with the Interdisciplinary Science Research Institute in Ashland, MA at the time of his death.

Ted Barber was born in 1927 in Martins Ferry, OH to Greek immigrant parents. He studied at St. John’s College in Annapolis, MD and earned his Ph.D. in psychology at American University in Washington, DC. He then went to Harvard to complete a postdoctoral research fellowship in the Department of Social Relations with Clyde Kluckhohn and William A. Caudill.

In 1961, Barber joined the research staff and later became the Director of Research at the Medfield Foundation. The Foundation was located on the grounds of the Medfield State Hospital in Medfield, MA and housed a number of researchers in psychiatry and psychology. His research was continuously supported through this period by grants from the National Institutes of Health. Through these grants and his adjunct appointments at Harvard and at Boston University, he attracted a number of research assistants and associates as well as postdoctoral fellows and visiting scholars to his laboratory.

Under Barber’s direction, Medfield became one of the most productive hypnosis laboratories in the world. The main thrust of his early work at Medfield was to accurately characterize the nature of hypnotic responding and help to demystify the concept. Barber’s ambitious research program examined the full spectrum of hypnotic phenomena from hypnotic analgesia and anesthesia to enhanced strength and endurance, alterations in sensory function, and amnesia. His research subjects also included a wide variety of patient and non-patient populations, adults and children.

Although he quickly emerged as one of the most vocal critics of contemporary theory and research in the area, Barber believed that hypnosis was a fascinating topic that belonged in the mainstream of social psychological research. He generated much controversy when he began placing the term hypnosis within quotation marks to signify his dissatisfaction with the way the concept was used tautologically to describe and explain the same phenomena. Subjects were said to be in a hypnotic state because they exhibited hypnotic behavior and the existence of the state was inferred from the very same behaviors the concept was intended to explain. While some critics felt Barber was too dismissive in his treatment of the concept of hypnosis, it became clear that he wanted to understand better the full range of human potentialities revealed in his research program and that he believed that effort would be obscured by unnecessary references to trance states.

Barber published more than 200 scholarly papers and 8 books. The best summary of his early experimental work for the scientific community was *Hypnosis: A Scientific Approach* (1969). Many of the findings reported here were brought to a wider audience in another volume, coauthored with Nicholas Spanos and John Chaves: *Hypnosis, Imagination, and Human Potentialities* (1974). His other books included: *LSD, Marihuana, Yoga, and*

Barber continued working at Medfield until 1978 when he was invited by Robert Kastenbaum to become Chief Psychologist at the Cushing Hospital in Framingham, MA where he remained until his retirement in 1986. At Cushing, he was Director of Special Projects, a position that gave him considerable flexibility to explore his interest in the clinical application of hypnosis. In addition, he began to turn to workshops as an important means of disseminating his ideas. He was particularly interested in clarifying the clinical implications of his previous research findings. As a result, he influenced many clinicians who had not previously become familiar with his scientific work.

Throughout this period, Barber continued to write about hypnosis as well as other related topics. His wide-ranging interests included the phenomenon of investigator bias, the mind-body problem, psychical phenomena and even comparative psychology. Many of his colleagues were surprised when he published The Human Nature of Birds: A Scientific Discovery with Startling Implications (1993) since they had previously not been aware of his interest in comparative psychology.

Barber’s interest in the mind-body problem was long-standing. In the 1980s, he began to work on a book that he hoped would make a major contribution to this topic and to related philosophical questions. From time-to-time, he would share preliminary drafts of chapters with his colleagues and invite them to debate the topics he was contemplating for inclusion which varied from evolution and teleology to the Gaia Hypothesis. The results of this final project will be published posthumously and concludes that consciousness, intelligence, and purposefulness can be found throughout the universe from cells to planets.

In recent years, Barber made serious attempts to find common ground among the competing theoretical perspectives on hypnosis. He recently settled on a tripartite model whose central notion is that there are three distinct subtypes of good hypnotic subjects. One type consists of highly motivated subjects holding a positive attitude towards hypnosis and willingness to respond. These were the same, task-motivated subjects who had been the focus of Barber’s early research. Another type consisted of the fantasy prone subjects. These were individuals who spend considerable time during childhood engaged in fantasy and continued this process secretly during adulthood. Barber and Wilson had done extensive research with fantasy-prone subjects. The third type consisted of amnesia prone hypnotic virtuosos who display various forms of amnesia for childhood events and in response to suggestion. Barber argued that conflicting views about the nature of hypnosis had emerged from work with these three different kinds of responsive hypnotic subjects.

Those who worked closely with Ted were impressed by his enormous energy and perseverance. Although his papers were consistently published in excellent journals, he constantly battled reviewers and editors who were skeptical about his findings and the way he interpreted his results. He seemed to feel a strong need to help others understand and appreciate his perspective. To help accomplish this end, papers that were published during the Medfield era were critiqued by everyone in the laboratory and all criticisms were taken seriously. Ted was a formidable scholar, thoroughly versed in original source materials, who loved to argue and debate. It was a rare treat when one of us could bring new facts to his attention. He was very generous with his time and strongly encouraged young scholars who had an interest in the field. His influence with young investigators extended far beyond the small group of scholars at Medfield.
Early in his career, Ted preferred writing papers and doing research to attending conferences. Nevertheless, he did eventually become active and achieved honorific recognition in many professional organizations. He was a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, the Massachusetts Psychological Association and the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis. He served on the editorial boards of many journals including Contemporary Hypnosis and the Journal of Mental Imagery. He received a number of awards including the Presidential Award for Lifetime Contributions to the Field of Hypnosis from the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis and the Award for Distinguished Contributions to Scientific Hypnosis from the Division of Psychological Hypnosis of the American Psychological Association.

Ted Barber’s research and personal encouragement has had a profound influence on the field and on many of today’s researchers and clinicians. As Alan Gauld (1992) noted in his comprehensive work, A history of hypnotism, “Barber has had a stronger influence on both conceptual and methodological aspects of hypnosis than any other worker…” (p. 583). He will be remembered by his colleagues and friends for the model of scholarship, perseverance, and passionate curiosity that he provided.

Ted Barber is survived by his children, X. Theodore Barber and Rania Richardson of New York, and Elaine Barber of Silver Springs, MD. He is also survived by two sisters, Angela Fardy of Westwood, NJ and Mary Brillis of Hastings-on-Hudson, NY and a brother, John Barber of San Antonio, TX.