The Perspective of a Teacher and Clinician:
The 2003 APA Division 30 Definition of Hypnosis

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Much appreciation is due to Green, Barabasz, Barrett and Montgomery (2005) for the collegial and inviting spirit of their article introducing the 2003 APA Division 30 definition of hypnosis. Their title, “Forging ahead,” is exactly right if we are to craft from our still diverse understandings of hypnosis a working definition to guide further dialogue. They suggest we treat this definition as a living document. They throw down the gauntlet and invite all of us, as members of professional hypnosis organizations, to pick it up.

The committee that produced this new definition also deserves thanks and respect. They have stayed the course and held up the mirror to the professional hypnosis community, asking that we look at what we, collectively, are able and willing to say. The fact that the definition cannot say more, and say it with strength and clarity, reflects more on the state of our theories and our discourse than on the committee.

The definition takes one step toward its goal of theoretical neutrality. However, it continues a confusion between what Weitzenhoffer (2002) calls “hypnosis” and “hypnotism”—it describes hypnotism and calls this a definition of hypnosis. It is thus vulnerable to the same criticism that Spiegel (1994) offered in response to the 1993 definition – it lacks a definition. Most importantly, it fails in its stated goal of being “user friendly” for clinicians and the lay public (Green et al., 2005, p. 261). Each of these criticisms is discussed in turn.

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The criticism that the 1993 definition revealed bias toward the socio-cognitive perspective on hypnosis (Green et al., 2005) is addressed in the new definition by the statement, “Many believe that hypnotic responses and experiences are characteristic of a hypnotic state.” It appears, however, that the same bias is subtly perpetuated by the phrase “many believe.” Certainly, many subjects and patients “believe” this because of their phenomenological experience of hypnosis. Most researchers in the field, however, appear to view hypnosis as being primarily a state (Christensen, 2005), as do many practitioners and teachers, and might well prefer to have their views characterized as widely accepted interpretations of the growing body of data rather than as mere beliefs.

The definition of hypnosis as a procedure satisfies many in the field, and the procedural definition provided here is elegant, as far as it goes. However, while explicitly stating that suggestions for imaginative experience characterize many inductions, the definition omits any reference to suggestions for increased absorption in inner experience, for dissociation from irrelevant external stimuli or from bodily awareness, for increased intensity of focus during the hypnotic experience, or for acceptance of useful suggestions. Many inductions commonly used in practice include the latter, and do not even mention imaginal involvement explicitly (although certainly practitioners will agree with the importance of this aspect of hypnotic experience). Moreover, many clinicians and leading thinkers in the field agree that hypnosis is necessarily characterized by “attentive, receptive concentration” (Hammond, 1998) in which “absorption, dissociation and suggestibility” are all present (Spiegel, 1994). Even a process-oriented description of hypnosis should include these dimensions.

The procedural nature of the definition is presented in its opening phrase, “Hypnosis typically involves…” In the final sentence, however, it states that “the salience of evidence for having achieved hypnosis increases with the individual’s score” (italics added). This hints at, but fails to explicitly acknowledge, our broadly shared view that hypnosis not only involves a procedure, but is something—the “product” described by Nash (2005). Nash (2005) rightly challenges us to free ourselves from our difficulties in stating publicly what that product might be by agreeing upon a pragmatic use of the term “state.” Doing so could allow us to provide a clinically and publicly useful definition of hypnosis. If necessary, another term, one without the connotations and history of the term “state,” might be introduced. Hammond (1998), for example, uses the word “phenomenon” in the definition he offers.

Surely what is desired—by our patients, those we train in our workshops, the public, the media, and especially our nonhypnotically trained colleagues in the health and mental health care professions—is a definition that includes not only the externally observable process of what the hypnotist does, but the phenomenological experience of the subject and the results of that experience. Without this, a definition may be useful as a springboard for further discussion within the scientific and clinical hypnosis community, but does not meet its stated goal of demystifying hypnosis for the lay public.

Most importantly, without such a section in our definition, we do not address the central clinical question: Is hypnosis useful? Do we agree that hypnosis can facilitate desired changes? If we cannot agree that there is something here, and that it has utility, it is stunning that we bother to study, teach, practice and define it.

The committee that produced the 2003 definition accepted an enormous task. Their work shows us that the field is not ready to offer one definition to serve the
diverse purposes of teaching hypnosis to our colleagues, presenting it to patients and the lay public, describing the common denominator in the views of academicians, driving further research in such a way that we all agree whether hypnosis was done, and satisfying ethical constraints. The current definition eliminates much of what is still debated among those in the field, and sums up that which most can endorse. Unfortunately, very little remains. Ultimately, the value of the 2003 APA Division 30 definition of hypnosis is found in its challenge to us all. If we will rise to this challenge, perhaps we can come closer, by iteration, to defining something we seem to think is important enough that we yearn to get it right.

References


