Defining Hypnosis: The UK Experience

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This paper discusses approaches to defining hypnosis with reference to three components: suggestion, trance, and induction. The author favors a “minimalist” approach that specifies the essential features of the procedure adopted by the hypnotist. Hypnosis having been thus defined, the processes that underlie the diverse responses and experiences of subjects are determined empirically, rather than included in the definition. This approach is compared and contrasted with the Division 30 definition of hypnosis.

“It depends what you mean by hypnosis.” How often is a discussion about hypnosis stalled by this statement? Clearly, we are in need of an agreed upon definition. Why then, after all these years, is hypnosis still struggling to have itself defined?

There are at least two obstacles in the path toward consensus. The first of these is disagreement as to whether we define hypnosis in terms of what the hypnotist does, what the subject does, or what both of them do. The second related obstacle is disagreement concerning the relative contributions to the definition of, on the one hand, suggestion or suggestibility and, on the other hand, altered state of consciousness or trance. There is much confusion concerning the relationship between these two concepts and this is evident in the struggle to establish a consensus in defining hypnosis.

What Is a Definition?

Before any attempt is made to define hypnosis, it is important to ask, “What is a definition?” The following quote is taken from Heap and Aravind (2002):

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A definition of any object, phenomenon, or process is a statement that gives its minimum essential properties, no more and no less. There should also be a consensus: we should all understand and accept the definition. It follows that the defining properties should be objectively observable, so that in any particular instance we can all agree that these properties are either present or absent. The definition then allows us to derive all other properties by the application of logic, mathematics or empirical investigation (p. 16).

For example, we can define a triangle as a three-sided plain figure. From this definition we can derive all other properties such as the fact that the angles always sum to 180°. It is therefore not necessary to include the latter property in the definition.

Of course, in attempting to define a human activity such as hypnosis, one can only aspire to such exacting standards as these. Nevertheless, any definition of hypnosis must be guided by these criteria. It is clear, therefore, that a definition should be atheoretical and it should not attempt to explain anything about hypnosis. Also, the defining properties are not necessarily those that are the most interesting or of the most practical significance.

**A Procedural Definition of Hypnosis**

In a working party report on hypnosis, commissioned by the British Psychological Society (BPS), my colleagues and I (Heap et al, 2001) opted for a definition of hypnosis that focuses predominantly on the **behavior and intentions** of the hypnotist rather than on the response and experience of the subject. The first part of this definition is as follows:

The term “hypnosis” denotes an interaction between one person, the “hypnotist,” and another person or people, the “subject” or “subjects.” In this interaction, the hypnotist attempts to influence the subjects’ perceptions, feelings, thinking and behavior by asking them to concentrate on ideas and images that may evoke the intended effects (p. 3).

The above key component of our definition is very similar to that in the Division 30 definition, namely:

When using hypnosis, one person (the subject) is guided by another (the hypnotist) to respond to suggestions for changes in subjective experience, alterations in perception, sensation, emotion, thought, or behavior.

My personal view is that, although these definitions do not specify precisely the form of the hypnotist’s communications (i.e., suggestions), they offer minimal essential properties in the manner that characterizes a true definition. Knowing only these properties, one can undertake experimental investigations into the diverse ways subjects may respond to the communications described in the definition, classify these responses, construct hypotheses concerning the underlying processes involved, make
predictions and test them, and so on, in the manner that has characterized the modern scientific investigation of hypnosis.

**The Subject’s Response To Suggestion**

One objection to this kind of definition is that because subjects can respond in different ways and some may not respond at all, one should include in the definition what it is that constitutes a “hypnotic” response by the subject. If so, how should one define a “hypnotic” response according to the earlier criteria for a definition? The BPS Working Party acknowledged this and added the following to the definition:

The verbal communications that the hypnotist uses to achieve these effects are termed “suggestions”. Suggestions differ from everyday kinds of instructions in that they imply that a ‘successful’ response is experienced by the subject as having a quality of involuntariness or effortlessness (p. 3).

In the spirit of this minimalist approach, no attempt is made to account for this subjective experience (e.g. dissociation). This is a matter for further experimental investigation. Note, however, that we are heavily reliant on the subject’s own account of whether his or her responses are experienced as “having a quality of involuntariness or effortlessness.” Like the authors of the Division 30 definition, the BPS Working Party added: subjects may learn to go through the hypnotic procedures on their own, and this is termed “self-hypnosis” (p. 3).

**Defining Hypnosis As an Altered State or Trance**

Thus far, the pivotal concept in this discussion on how to define hypnosis has been “suggestion.” Other definitions or descriptions are centered on the subject’s experience. For example, many aver that hypnosis is an altered state of consciousness that the subject experiences as a result of a hypnotic induction administered by the hypnotist. The subject remains in this state until alerted by the hypnotist. This “trance” state is regarded as having the property of “depth” and can be measured by subjective report using simple numerical scales (e.g. Tart, 1970) and more qualitatively, by self-report questionnaires (e.g. Pekala & Kumar, 2000). A more traditional method is to infer depth of trance from the subject’s response to different suggestions (e.g. profound analgesia indicates that he or she is in a “deep trance”; Waxman, 1989). People are deemed to vary in their capacity to experience trance (e.g. Waxman, *op cit*).

If we do take this approach, how are we to define hypnosis according to the criteria for a definition given earlier? Our Holy Grail, as it were, would be to discover a neurophysiological index that is unique to this hypnotic state and is not present otherwise. This is a tall order, as this signature should be detectable in any individual subject while he or she is responding to widely differing suggestions (ideomotor responses, analgesia, imagery evoking the full spectrum of emotions, hallucinations in various modalities, and so on).

A more practical option is to describe trance in experiential terms. This is a position that my colleagues and I have adopted (Heap et al., 2001; Heap & Aravind, 2002) using what we term a “weak interpretation” of the trance concept. According to this, trance is:
Defining Hypnosis: The UK Experience

A waking state in which the person’s attention is focused away from his or her surroundings and absorbed by inner experiences such as feelings, cognitions and imagery. (Heap & Aravind, 2002, p. 25)

Again, we opted for this definition because it appears to provide minimal essential properties, notably absorption. People may wish to go further than this and include, for example, the property of “dissociation.” But is this necessary? Again, the differences amongst the population in the processes involved when “in trance,” as defined above, may be investigated empirically and these need not be included in the definition.

The Hypnotic Induction

As I have indicated, my preference is for a minimal procedural definition of hypnosis that provides the essential indicators for determining, by empirical investigation, its range of properties. Should such a definition refer to the induction of hypnosis?

One may choose not to do so and to leave it to experimental enquiry to determine the effects of including and excluding an induction during hypnosis, likewise the effects of different types of induction (relaxation, passive-alert, active-alert, task-motivational, confusional, etc.). Of course, one still has to define the essential properties of an induction.

Alternatively one may include the induction in the definition. How is this to be defined? The Division 30 definition states the following:

The hypnotic induction is an extended initial suggestion for using one’s imagination, and may contain further elaborations of the introduction.

I think the authors of the definition could have been a little more specific here. In Heap and Aravind (2002), we defined induction in two ways. The first definition is as follows: A series of instructions and suggestions aimed at encouraging the subject to have a trance experience (as earlier defined; p. 67).

This definition refers to the traditional induction procedure but does not stipulate suggestions of relaxation (although we did so in Heap et al., 2001). These are not precluded by the definition, but the emphasis is on absorption and not on mental or physical relaxation.

There are, however, difficulties defining hypnosis in this way, and this comes back to the problematic relationship between the two major components of hypnosis: suggestion and suggestibility on the one hand, and the hypnotic state or trance on the other. Accordingly, in Heap and Aravind (2002) we also defined induction a second way: A series of instructions and suggestions intended to enhance the subject’s responsiveness to the suggestions to follow (p. 86).

One reason for having two definitions was to highlight the two different purposes of administering induction procedures. The research literature informs us that these are not coterminous. This is revealed by the fact that there are induction procedures that clearly are not “aimed at encouraging the subject to have a trance experience.” Included in these are those that encourage expansion of awareness (Bányai,
Zseni & Túry, 1993; Gibbons, 1979; Vingoe, 1973), task motivating instructions (Barber & Calverley, 1963a, 1963b), and even “placebo” inductions such as a “hypnotic” pill (Glass & Barber, 1961). Research (op cit) has demonstrated that the gains in responsiveness to suggestion following these procedures are similar to those following procedures that are compatible with the first definition.

There is no problem incorporating both definitions of induction into the general definition of hypnosis. My preference, however, is to omit any reference to the induction.

Conclusions

We can all agree that hypnosis is an interaction between two people in which one of them attempts, by suggestions, to influence the experiences and behavior of the other. Hence, the most constructive way of defining hypnosis is to specify, in the most parsimonious terms, the nature of the hypnotist’s communications. Having thus defined this interaction, one can conduct controlled experiments to investigate the diversity of experiences and behaviors exhibited by subjects and theorize on the processes that underlie these. From this perspective, theories of hypnosis are not necessarily incompatible; each may describe the different processes that may be called into play (role enactment, strategic enactment, imaginative involvement, dissociation, compliance, and so on) when hypnosis is carried out according to the definition.

Unfortunately, the Division 30 Definition of Hypnosis is an instructive example of the difficulties of assigning this kind of task to a committee whose members have diverse opinions on the subject, major features of the definition being its over-inclusiveness and lack of coherence. It seems unlikely that people, especially those unfamiliar with hypnosis, will understand the meaning of the statement: “A hypnotic procedure is used to encourage and evaluate responses to suggestions” and “If the subject responds to hypnotic suggestions, it is generally inferred that hypnosis has been induced.” Readers confronted by the sentence: “While some think that it is not necessary to use the word hypnosis as part of the hypnotic induction, others view it as essential” will ask, “Essential for what?” And it does not strike me that the last three sentences of the statement specify defining properties of hypnosis.

How do you define hypnosis? I suspect that the answer will remain: “It depends what you mean by hypnosis”.

References

Defining Hypnosis: The UK Experience