On Finding the Balanced Path of Hypnosis Definition

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The 2003 APA Division 30 Definition of Hypnosis (Div30Def; Green, Barabasz, Barrett, & Montgomery, 2005) was the outcome of an attempt “to forge a definition that was first and foremost empirically-based, theoretically neutral, and relatively concise and ‘user friendly’ to promote widespread acceptance among clinicians, researchers, and the lay public alike” (p. 261). In setting out the procedure followed to develop this definition, Green et al. (2005) usefully note criticisms of The 1993 APA Division 30 Definition of Hypnosis (Kirsch, 1994), the influence of the working definition of hypnosis that was developed at the University of Tennessee’s Conference on Brain Imaging and Hypnosis (Killeen & Nash, 2003), and the contentious issues that emerged in crafting the definition that they present. In a sometimes strong comment on parts of this definition, Nash (2005) argues that “vicious intellectualism” can be seen in the definition, and that the definition “is a clunky half-measure that leaves the definitional door wide open to unfortunate research designs that are grounded in a priori theoretical biases” (pp. 266-267).

In this comment, I wish to make three simple points: The first about what we should and should not expect from a definition of hypnosis; the second about the different audiences that we may want such a definition to speak to; and the third about finding the future path for a balanced definition of hypnosis that accepts ambiguity and embraces constructive pluralism.

First, we should not expect too much of definitions in psychological science. Ideally, a definition provides a precise statement of the nature and boundaries of some thing, and makes it clear to us what that thing is and what it is not. But many things in psychology do not admit to easy definition. Hypnosis—as a phenomenon and a process—is one of those things. The essential issue that crafters of definitions have to come to grips with is whether their definition is a fair representation of what is currently known about the essential nature of the thing.
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The Div30Def leans toward representing hypnosis as what is done to the subject, rather than what the subject experiences. In other words, it leans toward defining hypnosis in terms of the behavior of the hypnotist, rather than the experiences of the subject. In this sense, the definition goes only part of the way in providing a fair representation of the essential nature of hypnosis. I understand, of course, that to have gone the rest of the way and to have spoken about the experience of the subject might have led the crafters to not meet their goal of being “theoretically neutral.” Nevertheless, in not speaking about the experience of the subject, the definition is not as complete as it could have been. Specifying the experience of the hypnotized individual is at the core of understanding and applying hypnosis, and that point needs to be more apparent in the definition as it evolves and matures.

Second, we should not expect definitions to speak equally well to multiple audiences. Ideally, a definition will speak equally well to all relevant audiences. In psychology, for instance, these audiences might be researchers inside and outside the specific field, practitioners inside and outside the specific field, professionals in other disciplines, policy-makers who can influence the funding and public acceptance of the specific field, and members of the public. One can try to do this by finding the language that communicates equally well to them all, or by deciding on the points that one wants them to understand and then finding the appropriate language that communicates this to them. In my view, the language used does not have to be precisely the same for all audiences, but rather the understanding that they derive from reading the definition[s] should be essentially similar. The crafters of the Div30Def chose to use the one set of words— which they hope is “relatively concise and ‘user friendly’”—to convey an understanding of hypnosis to their multiple audiences of “clinicians, researchers, and the lay public.” I’m not sure, however, that these multiple audiences will get an essentially similar message from the definition. When I read the definition from the perspective of a researcher, a practitioner, or a member of the public, for instance, I can find different and sometimes contradictory messages in the definition. Moreover, from each of those perspectives it is perhaps too easy to develop an understanding that hypnosis is [almost] anything one wants it to be. (Try the thought exercise of giving testimony and of being cross-examined in court about hypnosis on the basis of the Div30Def, and reflect on how the definition would stand up in that [admittedly artificial] environment.) The question of what message different audiences would get from the definition is an empirical one, of course. In this respect, it would be interesting to show the Div30Def to multiple audiences, and to ask them to indicate what they understood hypnosis to be and not to be on the basis of the definition. The results may well be sobering. They may also provide some insight into the messages that are being received, as it were, from the definition. This, in turn, could help to determine what points need to be made and what words need to be used in future definitions for these multiple audiences.

Third, we should persist in evolving and maturing the understanding, application, and communication of hypnosis. To do this we have to be comfortable with ambiguity and we have to embrace the type of pluralism that is constructive. We should not have to overly constrain the domain of hypnosis in order to do this, but equally we should not make the domain so broad that anything goes, as it were; defining hypnosis too narrowly will constipate the field, and too broadly will lead to unfortunate diarrhea. Finding the balanced path will not be easy, but we need to do that if we are to
develop the best understanding possible of the nature of hypnosis, to link that understanding to what is known about other aspects of human behavior and experience, and to use that combined knowledge to help deal with medical and psychological disorders and to promote health and well-being. To do that, we need informed curiosity and careful inquiry, as well as a commitment to examine different approaches in optimal ways. By this, however, I don’t mean that hypnosis can be anything one wants it to be, and that any approach can be as equally good as any other. In an apparent attempt to be balanced and even-handed, the Div30Def comes a little too close at times to giving this message. From one perspective, the Div30Def language of “typically involves,” “may contain,” “many believe,” “some think,” etc. is understandable, accurate, and conveys the tolerance of ambiguity that our field must have. However, from another perspective that language gives a sense of uncertainty, hesitancy, and imprecision that could be exploited in science, in professional practice, and in the broader community’s understanding of the nature and effects of hypnosis.

Finally, one of the reasons that many in the field—whether primarily interested in the investigation or the application of hypnosis—became interested and involved is because of the impressive fact that the mere words of the hypnotist can initiate a variety of profound changes in the experience and behavior of subjects. This is the fascination and lustre of hypnosis. By tradition, definitions are not exciting, and the Div30Def is in this tradition. What our field needs to convey, perhaps even more than a definition of hypnosis, is excitement about the research questions about human behavior and experience that hypnosis allows to be asked, and achievement about the clinical outcomes that can be obtained when hypnosis is sensibly combined with appropriate treatment procedures. I hope that those senses of excitement and achievement emerge strongly as The 2003 APA Division 30 Definition of Hypnosis is discussed and the future directions of the field of hypnosis are determined.

References


