Theodore R. Sarbin
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Theodore R. Sarbin, Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Criminology at the University of California at Santa Cruz, died on August 31, 2005 at his home in Carmel, CA.

Sarbin was a pioneer in hypnosis research and theory. His interest in hypnosis began when he was a graduate student in the 1930s at Ohio State University. He collaborated with Joseph Friedlander on the development of the first standardized measure of hypnotic depth (Friedlander & Sarbin, 1938) providing a basis for the later development of the Stanford Scales by Hilgard and Wietzenhofer. He later collaborated with Julian Lewis on a study of hypnosis as a means of modifying gastric contractions (Lewis & Sarbin, 1943). A reanalysis of the findings of this study brought about a change in Sarbin’s view of hypnosis, for he discovered after the study was published that the subjects who showed the greatest effect of the inhibition of gastric contractions during hypnosis were also those subjects who exhibited the greatest amount of attenuated movement—such as lip smacking, chewing and swallowing—during the sessions. This led Sarbin to the view that hypnosis was not so much a special state as it was a role performance—a doing rather than a happening, as he would later put it (see Sarbin, 2005).

During his postdoctoral studies at the University of Chicago, Sarbin was exposed to the views of George Herbert Mead on social influence in the development of self. He later integrated these theoretical conceptions with his views on hypnosis, and published his theoretical interpretation of hypnotic behavior in a Psychological Review article in 1950.

Sarbin began his career as a research-oriented, clinical psychologist, practicing first in Illinois and later in Los Angeles. His academic career was established at the University of California at Berkeley where he served on the faculty from 1949-1969. During his time at Berkeley, he supervised more doctoral students than anyone else in his department, even while he continued to develop his own original lines of research on problems in social psychology, with special application to problems in the domain of psychopathology. Because of his publications in the area, he came to be known as “Mr. Role Theory,” defending the unorthodox position that problems conventionally thought of as “mental illness” could better be construed as moral judgments rendered
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by those in a position of social power about individuals whose conduct is unwanted or perceived as dangerous. He developed and maintained the view that hypnosis is not a special state, but rather a particular instance of role behavior and experience.

This view defined him with a skeptical, as opposed to credulous, view of hypnosis. He co-authored a book with William Coe interpreting a wide range of hypnotic phenomena under the rubric of “influence communication” (Sarbin & Coe, 1972). While the position he defended on the interpretation of hypnosis might be considered radical, Sarbin’s manner was consistently gentle and humane, even in arenas where the controversy was quite pitched.

He was President of Division 30 of APA from 1977-78. In 1978, he received the Morton Prince Award from the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis, and in 1994 received the Henry Murray Award from the American Psychological Association. In 1984, he received the Golden Pendulum Award for outstanding publications in hypnosis, and in 1993, the Division 30 award for Distinguished Contributions to Scientific Hypnosis.

Sarbin retained an active interest in hypnosis until the end of his life. In his last year, he published an article entitled “Reflections on some unresolved issues in hypnosis” (International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis, 2005). This article is presented as a sequence of imaginary dialogs with major figures in the recent history of research on hypnosis including Martin Orne, Ernest Hilgard, and Nicholas Spanos. In the end, Sarbin maintained his parsimonious and skeptical interpretation of hypnosis. While other hypnosis researchers may differ with his views, all must respect Ted Sarbin’s serious commitment to seeking the truth.

References


