Some Polite Applause for the 2003 APA Division 30 Definition of Hypnosis

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The authors argue that the new definition of hypnosis by Division 30 of the American Psychological Association contains questionable information about the role of imagination in hypnosis, about the use versus omission of the word hypnosis in inductions, and about the nature of individual differences and their relation to the standardized scales. In addition, the definition appears to conflate formal and exemplar-based types of definition, and it does not seem particularly well-tuned to the interests of lay persons. The authors advance some suggestions for future definitional efforts.

The stated goals of the 2003 definition of hypnosis by Division 30 of the American Psychological Association were two-fold: to devise an empirically-based, theoretically neutral definition that diverse experts could agree upon; and to provide a statement that could be given to lay persons to demystify hypnosis (Green, Barabasz, Barrett, & Montgomery, 2005). Based on these goals, we would propose the following criteria for critically evaluating the definition:

1) Because it is empirically-based, it should not contain statements that seem factually incorrect or that misrepresent strong empirical evidence about hypnosis.
2) Because it is a definition, it should specify the essence, or core defining features, of hypnosis, and how these features make it distinguishable from seemingly similar, but distinct phenomena.
3) Because it is intended in part for lay persons, it should provide the kinds of basic information that the public is commonly interested in.

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We look at each of these criteria in turn and indicate how they connect with classic definitions of what a definition is (drawn from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Simpson & Weiner, 1989).

**What Is in the Definition That Should Not Be**

Definition is always an enclosure of the true by exclusion of the false.

— J. Martineau

*Emphasis on imagination*

At the beginning of the definition there are statements that might be regarded as factually incorrect. In the first two sentences of the definition, which concern what the subject is told in the introduction and induction, the words “imaginative experiences” and “using one’s imagination” are very prominent. There are three ways in which this is problematic.

First, the introductions and hypnotic inductions of the most commonly used hypnosis scales, such as the Harvard Group Scale of Hypnotic Susceptibility, Form A (Shor & Orne, 1962) and the Stanford Hypnotic Susceptibility Scales (Weitzenhoffer & Hilgard, 1959, 1962), never use the words “imaginative” or “imagination,” nor do they refer to any close synonyms. Thus, it is simply not true in most scientific studies of hypnosis that this is what “the subject is told” in the introduction and induction. Nor is it our experience that what most clinical hypnotists tell clients about hypnosis is that it consists of “using one’s imagination.” Thus, we submit, these sentences are not an accurate description of what most hypnotic subjects are actually told in the introductory and induction phases of hypnosis.

Second, the wording of these two sentences is especially unfortunate because they suggest and then reinforce the idea that imagination is the process (or mechanism) underlying hypnosis. There is compelling scientific evidence that this is simply false. For example, Hargadon, Bowers, and Woody (1995) demonstrated that hypnotic analgesia did not depend on counterpain imagery, nor was it even slightly facilitated by such imagery. In short, this study clearly showed that hypnotic analgesia is not a result of “using one’s imagination.” Furthermore, these authors argued that because imagery is a common concomitant of hypnosis, it is falsely ascribed a causal role in hypnotic phenomena (see also Comey & Kirsch, 1999). Likewise, Zamansky (1977; Zamansky & Clark, 1986) demonstrated that hypnotic subjects can respond to suggestions even in the face of imagery that brazenly contradicts the suggestion. These results also showed very clearly that responding to hypnotic suggestions is not the result of “using one’s imagination.” Another interesting line of evidence is that in a brain-imaging study of subjects in hypnosis their responses when asked to *imagine* were readily differentiated from genuine hypnotic hallucinations (Szechtman, Woody, Bowers, & Nahmias, 1998). In other words, it is very clear that hypnotic hallucinations cannot be reduced to “using one’s imagination.” In short, imagination is neither necessary nor sufficient for hypnotic responsiveness. It is not irrelevant, but it is certainly not definitional.

Third, the terms “imaginative experiences” and “using one’s imagination” are not accurate descriptions of the phenomenology of hypnosis. In genuine hypnotic phenomena, the subject’s experience is not that he or she is imagining things. Rather,
hypnotic experiences crucially involve a change in the sense of agency, a feeling of involuntariness of such importance that Weitzenhoffer (1974, 1980) labeled it as the “classic suggestion effect.” Similarly, Tellegen (1978, 1979) argued that acts of imagination, that are not experienced as real, fail to meet the minimal criterion for hypnotic phenomena.

In summary, the definition’s emphasis on imagination seems misguided in three crucial respects: It is not a correct description of what most hypnotic subjects are told in the introduction and induction; it is not a correct scientific statement about the processes underlying hypnosis; and it does not accurately convey the phenomenological experience of hypnosis.

Using vs. omitting the word “hypnosis” in the induction

Another statement that does not appear to belong in the definition is the following: “While some think that it is not necessary to use the word hypnosis as part of the hypnotic induction, others view it as essential.” Nash (in press) has argued that this statement, in its refusal to advocate a clear position, is scientifically pernicious. In particular, it lends tacit approval to those researchers who would like to maintain that any procedure becomes operationally non-hypnotic simply if the word hypnosis is omitted. At a more basic level, we would point out that what “some think” and “others view” does not seem to have any place in an empirically based, theoretically neutral definition. What is crucial is the empirical evidence, which in fact, does not support either of the two implied, contrasting positions. In a review of relevant studies, Woody, Bowers, and Oakman (1992) argued strongly for the sometimes powerful effects of the subject’s perception of the situation as hypnosis, but they emphasized the subtle means by which subjects may infer that the situation is hypnosis even when there is no mention of the word hypnosis in the induction. In summary, the word “hypnosis” is neither unimportant nor essential.

Faulty characterization of the standardized scales

Fully one-third of the definition (the last four sentences) is an attempt to deal with the issue of individual differences as measured by the standardized scales. This passage is confusing and somewhat incorrect. Consider the following crucial sentence: “Suggestions that permit the extent of hypnosis to be assessed by comparing responses to standardized scales can be used in both clinical and research settings.” The entity to be assessed, “the extent of hypnosis,” is unclear and sounds more like hypnotic depth than hypnotic susceptibility. Further, the sentence misuses the term “standardized scales” by implying that they are separate from the suggestions used and serve simply as a basis for comparison. Instead, hypnosis scales are scales in the sense that the Wechsler intelligence scales are scales, and not in the sense that the centigrade and Richter scales are scales. That is, all hypnosis scales consist of a standardized set of suggestions, or test items, in the same way that the Wechsler intelligence scales consist of a battery of test items. Without administering the test, there is no scale. A person who did not already know this distinction could not guess it from this definition.

Now consider the last sentence in this passage: “As is the case with other positively scaled measures of psychological constructs such as attention and awareness, the salience of evidence for having achieved hypnosis increases with the individual’s score.” Like the earlier phrase, “the extent of hypnosis,” the phrase “having achieved
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"hypnosis" has no scientific meaning; in addition, it falsely implies some sort of dichotomous phenomenon, as if hypnosis were akin to breaking the sound barrier. Instead, along the range of scores obtained from a standardized scale, there is no cut-point for determining which subjects have "achieved hypnosis;" therefore, this wording is inconsistent with the very concept of the standardized scales. The rest of the passage, which introduces issues such as scoring categories used traditionally, does not clarify the nature of the individual differences involved or the way these differences are measured with the standardized scales.

What Is Not In the Definition That Should Be

Definition is that which refines the pure essence of things from the circumstance.

—Milton

Where is the essence?

Our second proposed criterion is that the definition should specify the essence, or core defining features, of hypnosis, and how these features make it distinguishable from seemingly similar but distinct phenomena. Most of the proposed definition could not possibly be used in this way—that is, to tell whether any particular instance falls within the definition of hypnosis. For example, the definition implies that the word "hypnosis" might be used or it might not; that the procedure might involve relaxation or it might not; that there might be a "state" of hypnosis involved or there might not; that there might be a hypnotist involved or there might not (in the case of self-hypnosis); and more generally, that the "details of hypnotic procedures and suggestions will differ depending on the goals of the practitioner and the purposes of the clinical or research endeavor." None of these vacillations point to what the essence of hypnosis might be. Neither do they demystify anything for lay persons.

The core of the proposed definition is the following sentence: "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." This is indubitably correct as far as it goes. However, a non-expert, only equipped with this statement (and the rest of the definition), could not guess what any of the classical hypnotic suggestions are as found on the standardized scales, such as ideomotor phenomena, positive and negative hallucinations, and so forth. More importantly, aside from the idea that one of the parties may possibly identify himself or herself as a "hypnotist," the statement provides no guidance about what would make hypnosis distinct from the myriad of other daily instances in which others make suggestions for us to change our thoughts and behaviors—including persuasive communications of all sorts, as made by sales people, politicians, spouses, and basically most everyone else in our lives.

Definition is an unfolding of the essence or being of a thing by its kind and difference.

—Bailey

Where are the examples?—Formal vs. exemplar-based definitions.

The definition avoids mention of examples of what hypnotic suggestions are
typically like (as in research), or what hypnosis can be used for (as in clinical work). Indeed, as an intended improvement, the committee omitted a sentence about typical clinical uses of hypnosis that had been included in the previous Division 30 definition. One problem with this omission is that by not indicating any uses, the definition may inadvertently suggest simply that hypnosis has no widely recognized uses.

There is a more fundamental issue here, however. The role of examples in a definition hinges crucially on which type of definition Division 30 was attempting to devise.

One type of definition is formal. A formal definition specifies the conditions to be met for any instance under consideration to be regarded as falling within the entity being defined. Formal definitions often lead us to parse up the world quite differently from what we do on a less formal basis. An example would be the botanical definition of a fruit—the ripened ovary of a seed-bearing plant—which clearly encompasses tomatoes and eggplants, but equally clearly excludes rhubarb. Note that in a formal definition examples are unnecessary because the rules specified by the definition, in and of themselves, should be clear enough that anyone can apply them to any instance under consideration.

The following proposal by Kenneth Bowers could be regarded as an attempt to provide a formal definition of hypnosis: “An effect is not a classic suggestion effect [that is, a genuine hypnotic effect] unless it is correlated with hypnotic ability as standardly assessed” (Bowers, 1982, p. 6). This statement specifies formal conditions to be met: The criterion is anchored in individual differences with the standardized scales serving as the gold standard. It is quite possible that many things called hypnosis would not meet this definition; indeed, Bowers’ intent was to exclude non-specific effects that are not part of the essence of hypnosis.

The issue here is not whether Bowers’ definition is better or worse than the Division 30 definition, but instead, whether the Division 30 version represents an attempt at a formal definition. For reasons detailed earlier, we believe the answer is no: The Division 30 definition does not propose specific criteria to determine what falls within the domain of hypnosis and what does not.

Another type of definition is exemplar-based. Such a definition of fruit might be the following: “A typically sweet, juicy, plant-produced food, such as apples, oranges, and bananas.” In contrast to a formal definition, where all the things being defined must meet all of a small set of criteria, in an exemplar-based definition the things being defined are viewed in comparison to specified prototypical information (sweet, juicy, and similar to apples, oranges, and bananas). These prototypes serve as cognitive reference points for all instances under consideration, and the entity being defined has fuzzy boundaries rather than clearly delineated ones (Rosch, 1975, 1978). The prototypes or exemplars capture what is typical, in the sense that on average many instances of the entity being defined resemble them. In addition, instances under consideration are viewed as differing continuously, rather than discretely, in how closely they resemble the exemplars, with some nearer the heart of the definition and others nearer the fuzzy boundaries. For instance, avocados lie rather far from the heart of the foregoing exemplar-based definition (even though, by the formal definition, they are a fruit). Much everyday reasoning, by both lay persons (Cantor & Mischel, 1979) and professionals (Cantor, Smith, French, & Mezzich, 1980), is of this type; and Neisser (1979) argued that the concept of intelligence can only be defined in this exemplar-based, fuzzy-set way.
Unlike in a formal definition, where examples are superfluous, in an exemplar-based definition the specification of prototypical information, such as good examples, is absolutely essential. Without them, there are no cognitive reference points with which to get one’s bearings. We believe that the Division 30 definition reads like an exemplar-based, fuzzy-set definition, but unfortunately fails to include any clear exemplars—that is, examples of things that would be unimpeachably hypnotic. As noted earlier, there is no mention in it of classical hypnotic suggestions or of well-established clinical uses of hypnosis. As such, the definition strikes us as somewhat of a contradiction in terms.

**How To Demystify Hypnosis**

It is the object of Definition...to answer the question, “What is it?”

—W. L. Davidson

Our third proposed criterion is that the definition should provide the kinds of basic information that interests the public. To frame the issue of what the public wants to know, we suggest the following somewhat irreverent but useful model: a can of WD-40.

The formal definition of WD-40—namely, its chemical composition and structure—would be useless to lay persons. In addition, the can is quite small, so it needs to demystify WD-40 very compactly.

In just a few words, the writing on the WD-40 container specifies the following:

1) The contexts in which it may be used (“on the job, at home, on the farm and in recreation”)
2) How it is used (e.g., “saturate area and let soak for several minutes”)
3) What it is good for (“lubricates hinges, wheels,…; cleans grease, grime,…; protects against rust and corrosion; penetrates nuts, bolts,…; displaces moisture to restore wet or flooded equipment…”)
4) Precautions in its use (e.g., “direct inhalation of spray may be harmful”)

Similar to how the WD-40 container packages some scientific phenomena (in the sense that what is in the can must obey the laws of chemistry), a definition of hypnosis for the public needs to package certain scientific phenomena in a way that clearly indicates their potential relevance. We think a good framework in this endeavor is to answer the following questions—namely, in what contexts is hypnosis used, how is it used, what is it good for, and what are important precautions in its use? The Division 30 definition does not seem to answer any of these questions particularly clearly, and it is completely silent on some of them (e.g., what is it good for and what are important precautions?).

**Conclusion**

Green and his colleagues (2005) noted that the Division 30 definition of hypnosis evolved carefully over a period of nearly a decade, with input from over two dozen of the world’s foremost experts on hypnosis. Thus, writing this critique offers,
in one fell swoop, an unparalleled opportunity to offend nearly every important expert in the field.

So why did we do it? We applaud the dedication and hard work of the Division 30 committee. Our take-home message, however, is that the devising of a truly satisfactory definition may require more careful background preparation, including answering the following questions:

1) What are the core empirical findings that should form the basis of a definition of hypnosis? (It is important that these do not become lost or mutated as the definition evolves.)
2) What type of definition is desired, or even possible (e.g., formal vs. exemplar-based)? What are the characteristics of an effective definition of the selected type?
3) What are the questions the public has about hypnosis? How far can a definition for the public go in answering such questions?

Without first addressing these issues, any definition, no matter how well-intended or lovingly crafted, is likely to be problematic in important ways.

References


