Commentary: Reversing Amnesia About Hypnosis

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All that Kirsch and colleagues are harping on is that a formal hypnotic induction is not needed to elicit hypnotic response among hypnotizable people. That is why results are often comparable when hypnotic suggestions are given with and without a formal induction. Furthermore, many of the so-called ‘nonstate’ studies do not take hypnotizability into account. Differences of any kind, with or without a hypnotic induction, are unlikely to emerge among people who are not at least somewhat hypnotizable. It may indeed be the case that many people are not aware of slipping in and out of hypnotic states because it is such a natural shift in consciousness among those with the capacity. People do so spontaneously during intense experiences of absorption (Tellegen and Atkinson, 1974; Tellegen, 1981), traumatic stress (Spiegel, 1991; Spiegel, 2001; Butler, Duran, et al., 1996), or ‘flow.’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Those with the ability may not identify it as particularly unusual because it is part of their routine cognitive-experiential landscape.

From the article: “When controlling for the effect of nonhypnotic suggestion, it is crucial that the exact same suggestion is given in both the hypnotic and nonhypnotic conditions. People can be remarkably sensitive to the wording of imaginative suggestions. If the wording is not the same in both conditions (e.g., Kosslyn, Thompson, et al., 2000; Iani, Ricci, et al., 2006), it can confound the nature of the induction of hypnosis and the nature of the suggestion. With such ambiguity, it is impossible to know whether differences in response are due to hypnosis or to differences in the wording of the suggestion.”

Talk about ambiguity – I cannot make sense of the meaning of this paragraph, especially as a co-author of the Kosslyn et al. study. By definition, the
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wording has to be different or you don’t have two conditions. We told people to either add color to a black, white and grey grid or drain color from one of similar design that was colored. We observed bidirectional effects in PET blood flow in the color processing regions of the brain – an increase when color was ‘added,’ a decrease when it was removed (Kosslyn, Thompson, et al., 2000). Where is the ambiguity here?

Kirsch et al: “Note that these theorists did not doubt that subjective changes were produced by hypnotic suggestion, as has sometimes mistakenly been claimed (e.g., Spiegel, 1998). They merely disputed whether or not those effects were due to or enhanced by an altered state of consciousness (i.e., the so-called hypnotic trance).” This is just not the case. There is a long history of denial of the subjective reality of ‘hypnotic’ effects, presented in detail in Spanos’ article cited by Kirsch and colleagues (Spiegel, 1987). Spanos argued then that so-called hypnotic hallucinations would be semi-transparent illusions rather than robust obstructions to vision, despite electrophysiological data to the contrary.

This ongoing ‘dispute’ is just a tiresome turf battle. Those with special interest in social influence want to claim that their domain is the one that counts – social influence is all. If it were such a powerful suggestion, we all would have been hypnotized by now. I’m not influenced, persuaded, or hypnotized. Santanaya was right. What he really meant is that hypnotic amnesia (or amnesia about hypnosis) leads to involuntary behavioral repetition. Let’s not forget what it’s all about.

References


