Commentary: The Ghosts of Research Past

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Kirsch at al (in press this issue) argue that phenomena produced by suggestions in hypnosis can be produced almost as well by suggestion without the induction of hypnosis. They base their conclusion in part on a research paradigm using imaginative suggestions (Braffman & Kirsch, 1999; Braffman & Kirsch, 2001). Subjects are asked to imagine that their arm is rising, or that their arms are moving apart, or their arms are immobile, items all taken from the Carleton University Responsiveness to Suggestion Scale (Spanos et. al., 1983a, 1983b). In that situation, and with those suggestions, there is no significant or practical difference between a response following a “waking suggestion” and one following a hypnotic induction. The responses of interest are relatively simple, observable and for the most part highly practiced.

Consider now an alternative suggestion paradigm. A middle aged male has habitually over used tobacco for many years. On the evening of a certain January 1, in a condition that could be called “waking,” he suggests to himself: “That was my last cigarette.” On January 2, he is seen to be smoking. He repeats this process every year for five more consecutive years. On the next January 3 he hires a therapist to teach him self hypnosis. After the session, the client relaxes, remembers that the therapist told him that smoking brings poison to his body, he needs his body to live, that he owes his body respect. He repeats to himself some instructions designed to produce hypnosis, and then suggests “I’m never going to smoke again”. He follows that hypnotic suggestion, stops smoking, and lives a longer, healthier life, consistent with the clinical literature (Green and Lynn 2000). In this imagined case, the suggestion following hypnotic induction is considerably more effective. Does that trump Kirsch’s generalized, reductionistic argument? Clearly, no.

It may simply be that the situation that Kirsch describes, while real, is limited. It may be that hypnotic suggestions are not very impactfull on certain imaginative suggestions; suggestions that are highly practiced, involve simple
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motoric responses, and occur over a relatively short span of time. It is conceivable that the responses to these suggestions are so over determined that a hypnotic induction has a minor, insignificant impact. Conclusions from suggestions for simple responses may not generalize to complex ones.

Consider now abstention, which is a complex emotional and cognitive as well as motoric response, and which occurs over a relatively long period of time. A simple waking suggestion: “This is my last cigarette” does not change the behavior. But a suggestion following hypnotic induction, repeated over time, may be more powerful. We might speculate why that is so, but not in this brief comment.

The point here is simply to suggest that failure to differentiate aspects of the past may inadvertently lead to incomplete projections about the future.

References


