An Early Nineteenth Century Absorption-Based Theory of Mesmerism

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Abstract

In 1844, an obscure and little-remembered American theorist, A. Yorke (no further identification is available), published a theory of mesmerism based on absorption, i.e., mental concentration. Unlike Mesmer’s conceptualization of animal magnetism as a biological fluid, however, Yorke’s theory emphasized the psychological importance of the mutual interaction between mesmerist and subject. This paper discusses the latter’s theory of absorption as an important development in neo-mesmerism, the circumstances that led him to his conclusions, and his role in advancing our knowledge of the historical origins of modern hypnosis.

“Everything has been thought of before. The difficulty is to think of it again.”
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

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The eminent theorist and historian, Ernest R. Hilgard, observed that the current theories of hypnosis are in disarray basically because there are no distinguishing psychological, physiological, or neurological bases between hypnotic behavior and normal waking consciousness (Hilgard, 1992). Long after Franz Anton Mesmer’s late eighteenth century beliefs, a number of conceptual views to explain hypnosis have been proposed in modern times: state, socio-cognitive, role-play, ego-psychological, psychological regression, person-centered communication, social learning, and neo-dissociation theories (see Lynn & Rhue, 1991, for discussions of these).

It is evident from the current scientific literature that absorption, defined generally as mental concentration, is a prominent factor in facilitating hypnotizability and hypnotic behavior. The historical literature on mesmerism, the direct predecessor of modern-day hypnosis, reveals that the significance of this personality trait had been recognized more

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than a century prior to the scientific research beginning in the 1960s. This paper will discuss the obscure author of that early theory, the circumstances that led him to his conclusions, and his role in advancing today’s understanding of hypnosis.

The early 1840s were important times for hypnosis. Self-hypnosis had by then been practiced, having originally been described by Mesmer who treated himself for a gastrointestinal problem (Gravitz, 1994b); the modality had already been effectively utilized in a number of clinical areas, especially surgical anesthesia and pain management (Gravitz, 1988); professional societies had been founded in a number of parts of the United States; and numerous specialty periodicals had been published (Gravitz, 1987, 1994a). It is evident that many of the clinical applications of hypnosis in use today had their origins more than a century ago. Concurrently, however, corrupting influences had begun to impact the field negatively with the emergence of such non-scientific movements as phrenology and spiritualism, so that important healthcare and science leaders lost respect for the method. The lesson to be learned from that history is that when responsible authorities allow a therapeutic modality to become contaminated by non-scientific notions and unsubstantiated claims, then the field will lose the positive regard of colleagues and the public and will then inevitably fade from the scene. Such sequence of events has happened to hypnosis several times during its lengthy history.

Mesmer’s original Newtonian-influenced theory of animal magnetism proposing an invisible physical fluidum had been modified by the turn of the eighteenth century by a few investigators, notably the Marquis de Puysegur, who discounted the existence of a physical force. Mesmerism as theory, therapy, and nomenclature remained influential, however, until the early 1840s. At that time, James Braid proposed the more scientifically acceptable view that animal magnetism was not a viable concept, and he began using the term “hypnotism” and its cognates. Braid did not originate such nomenclature, even though that is frequently attributed to him, but he did popularize the terminology that had first been used by the French in the early 1800s (Gravitz & Gerton, 1984). As a result of Braid’s work, the conceptual basis of mesmerism lost whatever positive cachet remained by that time, and the very name gradually faded from use.

It was within that timeframe that a certain Dr. A. Yorke in 1844 published in Philadelphia a brief treatise entitled, “Absorption: A rational and consistent system of mesmerism; exposing many of the fundamental errors prevalent upon this subject” (Yorke, 1844). In so doing, he was the first, more than 160 years ago, to propose that absorption was a significant factor in mesmeric (hypnotic) theory and practice, and this emphasis has remained relevant to the present day. Other than his self-appellation as a “Professor of Mesmerism,” numerous inquiries to major archival sources (including the National Library of Medicine, Library of Congress, Franklin Institute of Philadelphia, etc.) in an effort to identify Yorke further yielded negative results.

While Yorke’s monograph was published in Philadelphia, there is no evidence that he came from that city, and according to the Chief of Reference of the authoritative Library Company of Philadelphia his name does not appear in any of the City Directories through the 1840s (Lapsansky, 2006). Some years prior to his work, there was founded the Philadelphia Pathematic Association, a group that was based on Sunderland’s earlier theory of pathetism and certain vague mesmeric principles (Gravitz, 1994a); but that organization was focused on a religion-based revivalism and spiritualism rather than classical mesmerism. Furthermore, being a mesmerist himself, Yorke would presumably have had little if any interest in becoming part of the so-called pathematic movement in that city.
Inferring from the contents of his book, he apparently was one of the numerous contemporary lecturers and practitioners of mesmerism, virtually all of whom are historically unknown, since he reported performing “numerous experiments” and having “pupils throughout the United States” (Yorke, 1844, p. i). In any event, he has been a virtually unknown figure in the overall history of mesmerism/hypnotism in America, for despite his book and his then-unique but forward looking emphasis on absorption, he did not leave a lasting impression on the contemporary field. Such developments are not unknown even in today’s information age, and it is likely that many of today’s contributors will also be unknown 160 years from now.

At this point, one may consider: What is meant by absorption? General and medical dictionaries tend to define it in terms of chemistry and physics, but in the field of psychology it has a different connotation. In modern hypnosis theory, the psychological trait of absorption (termed imaginative involvement by J.R. Hilgard, 1979) has been experimentally demonstrated to be positively correlated with the experience of hypnotic behavior (Sapp, 2000). After a review of the literature, Edmonston (1986), a noted theorist, concluded that there is a relationship between hypnotizability and an individual’s ability to become absorbed in an activity, although a relationship is not the same as a direct correlation. Roche and McConkey (1990) have defined absorption as the hypnosis-facilitated openness to cognitive and emotional experiences that involve the modification of reality testing by narrowing or expanding the degree of awareness.

Other investigators, notably Tellegen and Atkinson (1974), have found that the personality trait of absorption, defined by the latter as openness to absorbing and self-altering experiences, is so closely and perhaps necessarily involved in hypnotic responsiveness that hypnosis could be considered to be a condition essentially based on absorption. It must be noted that their research was concerned with hypnotic susceptibility rather than the fundamental nature of hypnosis; in other words, hypnotizability and hypnosis are not the same. Tellegen acknowledged that the basic concept of absorption in hypnosis had a longer history that he dated back to the work of As and his associates in the early 1960s (As, 1962, 1963). To study the trait, Tellegen (1982, 1987) developed a measurable absorption scale, and subsequent research utilizing this instrument has verified the strong relationship between hypnotizability and absorption (Glisky, 1991; Glisky & Kihlstrom, 1993). Kihlstrom (2006), an important modern scholar in the field, has concluded that the currently most often studied correlate of hypnotizability is absorption (cf. also Fromm & Nash, 1992).

Based on research using his test, Tellegen (1982, p. 2) found that an individual scoring high on a measure of absorption is “emotionally responsive to engaging sights and sounds … (which) explains episodes of expanded (extrasensory, mystical) awareness and other alerted states.” Edmonston (1986, p. 383) added that “if absorptive behavior is the personality underpinning of the capacity of hypnosis, it is as old as the ancients; only our method of quantifying it is new.”

Yorke was clearly an adherent to mesmerism. He believed that the “strictly immaterial mind” influenced the “strictly material body” by means of a universal “vital principle” and “imponderable fluid” based on electricity and possessed by everyone. Relatedly, he maintained that there is a “connecting link between mind and matter … (that) acts upon and influences the body” (p. 7). He also wrote that if the universal magnetic fluid which lies within the nervous system becomes disorganized and dark and dull in color, then pain and illness result, while healthy fluid is white and luminous. By such beliefs, Yorke distanced himself from traditional mesmeric theory and practice.
As did Mesmer before him, Yorke believed that he could treat disease by magnetically enhancing the healthy “vital principle” of the body. That treatment process was considered by him to be facilitated by concentrating the “nervous” (i.e., mental) energy of the subject. Such concentration was in turn best achieved by enabling the subject “to keep the attention fixed upon a single subject, to the exclusion of all other thoughts” (p. 12): in other words, absorption. Fixation of attention has been a prime method of hypnotic induction for many decades and is related to the modern conceptualization of absorption. Since not everyone can attend or absorb to the same optimal degree, Yorke reasoned, that explained why not everyone could be mesmerized and why the results would vary. That, too, resonates with modern theory. He also believed that the subject was influenced by those around him, which “often caused trouble,” but by having the subject become focused on the mesmerizer, this negative and distracting influence could be controlled. Likewise, the mesmerizer’s positive influence could be absorbed by the subject. Such beliefs can be seen as anticipating modern views on transference and countertransference (Gravitz, 2004). Curiously, Yorke believed that absorption could also impact the subject’s phrenological organs on the skull in what was termed “phreno-magnetism,” a belief held by some in those days. This latter theory has no scientific basis, and phrenology long ago faded from the stage of respectable history.

Unlike today’s understanding of absorption as an important psychological factor in hypnotizability, Yorke’s belief was based in part upon Mesmer’s fundamental view that there was an inherent biological process involved in the interaction between magnetizer and subject and that there was a physical transmission of a fluid in both directions; that is, mutually between the magnetizer and the subject. From this understanding, Mesmer gradually came to recognize that the interrelationship between the two could be a factor for either good or bad in magnetic healing. Similarly, Yorke’s position was that successful mesmerism required both subject and mesmerist to be fully absorbed in “a mutual exchange” with each other (p. 14). “The chief condition for being mesmerized is an ability to devote the whole attention to the mesmerizer. [The phrenological center of] Concentrativeness being strongly marked, which creates an ability to keep the attention fixed upon a single subject, to the exclusion of other thoughts” (p. 14). These beliefs can be understood as forerunners to the much later important construct of transference/countertransference in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, which coincidentally evolved from Freud’s personal experiences with hypnosis (Gravitz, 2004). Yorke also wrote that he intended for his emphasis on absorption to replace the “ridiculous idea” that mesmerism is the product of an “imperial will,” a belief then held by many contemporaries; indeed, he considered that to be an absurd, ridiculous, and mystical notion held by mesmeric “quacks” (p. vi). Yorke was aware that his theory varied from classical mesmerism, which he characterized at one point as an attractive mystery, but he correctly insisted that his position on absorption represented an advanced understanding of the process involved.

Based on the historical record, it is evident that Yorke, more than a century and a half ago, and virtually unknown today, helped to build an important conceptual bridge between traditional mesmerism and our modern understanding of hypnosis. In doing so, his theory of absorption underscores the fact that in the historical study of a theory, seemingly minor findings of the past may subsequently be understood as important steps in developing more complete understanding.


