



The Skeptics SA guide to Hypnosis

The controversial Viennese physician, Franz Mesmer, (1734 – 1815) was the first to describe what we now call hypnosis. His name gave rise to the term Mesmerism. He ascribed his therapeutic successes to a physical agency he called animal magnetism. James Braid (1795–1860), a Manchester doctor, coined the term ‘hypnotism’ when he rejected the animal magnetism theory. He attributed the altered state of consciousness to prolonged fixation of the eyes on a bright object.

Experimental evidence obtained under scientific conditions does not support the extravagant claims made about the hypnotic state. It is true that analgesia can be produced by hypnosis. However this is no more than the normal ability everyone has to suppress pain. Minor sports injuries such as cuts, abrasions and bruises are common and often pass unnoticed until long after the injury was sustained. Pain is related to the degree of attention focused on it. Insertion of a hypodermic needle for an injection may feel unduly painful when carefully observed by the patient. Attention focused on sporting activity diverts attention from pain. Hypnosis can teach a subject to disregard pain, and may be useful in dental surgery. Claims of major surgery under hypnotic anaesthesia alone have not been scientifically

confirmed, and in most observed cases, drugs, sedation and chemical anaesthesia have been used in addition.

Hypnotic analgesia differs from that which occurs in 30% of patients taking a placebo (an inactive medication such as a sugar pill). In the latter case the body produces powerful morphine-like chemicals – endorphin is one – which block pain reception. This has been proved by the fact that Naloxone, a morphine antagonist, neutralises its pain killing property, and also prevents the analgesic effect of a placebo. Naloxone does not block hypnotic analgesia, which shows that endorphin is not involved in this case. Hypnotic analgesia depends on the mind-body relationship, and the power of suggestion. When Bertrand Russell went to his dentist with toothache, the dentist examined his mouth and asked “Where does it hurt?” “In my mind, of course,” Russell answered. Acupuncture as a treatment of pain probably produces its effect by inducing endorphin secretion.

Everybody has the ability to choose deliberately when to react to pain and when not to react. Hypnosis helps you to decide. From this it is clear that it is you who makes the decision, not the hypnotist. There is no such thing as

‘hypnotic power’. This is a myth. Hypnosis is actually self-hypnosis, the so-called hypnotist simply guiding the subject. In fact the hypnotist is not actually essential for the experience. Hypnosis may be induced by a tape recording. The method of inducing hypnosis usually starts by the subject being instructed how to consciously relax voluntary muscles by first contracting them, and then releasing them. He is told to fix his eyes on a bright object, such as a torch with a dimming circuit which can slowly be extinguished. Speaking in a slow, quiet, but authoritative voice the hypnotist suggests relaxation and sleep. The subject’s eyes will often close spontaneously.

There is no scientific evidence that hypnosis increases memory recall, or muscle strength. Some therapists believe that hypnosis can produce age regression to early childhood, and even early infancy. They suggest that memories from this early period in the subject’s life can be recovered. However there is no reason to believe in the validity of recovered memories. Memories that are not kept in mind repeatedly, or refreshed regularly, will decay. They are not recoverable as the identical episode as originally experienced. Therapists and ‘counsellors’ in California have described memory retrieval from the crib onwards.

These memories have almost invariably involved sexual abuse. As a result, adults have accused their parents of sexual abuse in childhood which they had forgotten until 'memory' was restored to them under hypnosis. In the hands of therapists who believe in immediately searching for these events, the patient is quickly encouraged to produce childhood memories. This has resulted in law suits and the break-up of families, and many parents have lost contact with their children. A False Memory Syndrome Foundation has been formed in the USA to assist such parents. The fact is that hypnosis alters the mood state and thereby affects memory retrieval. Mood has a powerful effect on memory.

The common belief that hypnosis increases memory retrieval has been shown experimentally to be false. Memories retrieved under hypnosis have proven to be highly unreliable. There is generally a desire by susceptible subjects to please the hypnotist. They may readily agree to a suggestion, even if untrue. The general belief that hypnosis will always bring out the truth is incorrect. Lying and fantasy are far more common than truth.

In recent years, Multiple Personality Disorder has attracted attention, particularly in the USA, and hypnosis has been involved in most cases. In 1954 two American psychologists reported a case in which they produced three different personalities in their patient under hypnosis. They later produced a book, *The Three Faces of Eve*, and a film was made of it. From then on (1957) reports of cases mul-

tiplied enormously, and Multiple Personality Disorder is common: but only in the USA. It is very rare in Europe, the UK and Australia. Merskey (1995), who has made a special study of this subject, points out that the condition is almost certainly created by the implicit demands of therapists using hypnosis. He quotes the case of a 27 year old waitress in Oshkosh Wisconsin who claimed to have 46 different personalities, six of whom were sworn in and gave testimony in a trial. The record at present stands at 110 different personalities claimed by one patient.

Post hypnotic suggestion is the term used when the subject responds to a suggestion made earlier in the hypnosis session, and usually with the claim of no memory of the suggestion. Whether the subject truly has no memory of the suggestion is doubtful. The desire of the subject is to please the therapist, and some degree of play acting is involved. There is no evidence that a subject will perform a post hypnotic suggestion act which he would not normally do. Stage hypnosis generally is condemned by psychiatrists. The reason is that emotionally unstable subjects may be adversely affected by the procedure. For example, it may be incorporated into the delusional system in paranoid schizophrenia. A stage hypnotist will usually select vulnerable subjects by a simple test of their suggestibility. He may say to his audience "When I count three you will feel compelled to stand up". Those who obey this command are then selected to go up on the stage.

Despite the criticism and scepticism put forward in this article, hypnotism is occasionally a useful therapeutic procedure, particularly in the rather rare cases of hysterical amnesia. However, the imaginative claims often made about hypnosis do not stand up to vigorous scientific testing and critical evaluation.

For further reading

Barber, FX, 1969, *Hypnosis: a Scientific Approach*, New York. Van Nostrand Reinhold Co

Hull, CL, 1933, *Hypnosis & Suggestibility*, New York, Appleton Century Crofts

Merskey, H, 1995, *The Analysis of Hysteria*, Gaskell, London

Sydney Bockner

Skeptics SA

The South Australian branch of the Australian Skeptics

For further information on the Australian Skeptics and the journal, *the Skeptic*, contact:

Email: <info@skepticssa.org.au>

Web site: <www.skepticssa.org.au>