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New Ideas in Psychology 23 (2005) 33–48

NEW IDEAS IN PSYCHOLOGY

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# Hypnosis and sociogenetic influences in human development

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**Abstract**

This paper revisits the too-long-overlooked relation between hypnosis and human development, aiming to understand hidden, yet powerful sociogenetic processes in development that are exposed in hypnosis. Hypnosis, as a process of interpersonal exchange, not only provides empirical evidence that such factors *can* dramatically influence intramental functioning, it also affords a glimpse of *how* such influences occur. Hypnosis results from common sociopsychological and interpersonal processes organized in ways that mimic key, essential features of child–caregiver involvements: interpersonal, asymmetric relationships of shared mentation for common purposes. Within these relationships of organic attunement, in both hypnosis and development, authoritative procedural directives become internalized without awareness. Hypnotic transformations of perceptions, memory, beliefs, anticipations, and behavior reveal just how powerful these relationships can be. And while the effects of hypnosis may startle, the magnitude and reach of the effects are precisely what development requires: organizing body and mind within the web of sociocultural meanings, values, and expectations.
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*Keywords:* Development; Sociogenesis; Hypnosis

## 1. Introduction

Consider hypnosis. We engage in a relatively brief exchange with a stranger who possesses some measure of authority. As a result, we become capable of feats that are usually considered impossible: parts of our body are "anesthetized" and surgery can be

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doi:10.1016/j.newideapsych.2005.08.001

performed without pain; untreatable warts and congenital skin disorders disappear; wounds heal faster; surgical blood loss is greatly reduced. We undergo auditory, visual and proprioceptive disorientation, experience visions that are perceived as real and lose our sense of volition (Crasilneck & Hall, 1985; Hilgard, 1986; Hilgard & Hilgard, 1994; Olness & Kohen, 1996). Hypnosis challenges common assumptions about mind and body, self in relation to other, and exposes unappreciated human capacities that can derive from a simple interpersonal exchange.

Hypnosis is a paradigmatic phenomenon. Its significance, however, often has been overlooked in contemporary psychological theory. This was not always the case. The importance of hypnosis for understanding basic principles of human functioning was recognized at the end of the 19th century. Indeed, the origins of modern psychiatry and psychotherapy can be traced to the research conducted at that time on hypnosis and hysteria (Ellenberger, 1970). Freud's (1920/1943; 1922/1951) theory emerged within the context of this inquiry and offered insights into the nature of psychopathology and human development. Vygotsky (1978), too, was influenced by the investigation of hypnosis. Extrapolating from Janet's hypnosis research, Vygotsky proposed that sociocultural factors play a formative role in the development of intramental processes (Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000; van der Veer & Valsiner, 1988).

Contemporary sociogenetic approaches to development, following Vygotsky, also presume that interpersonal factors give form to intramental functioning (Rogoff, 1998; Valsiner, 1997; Wertsch, 1998).The magnitude of these presumed effects, however, is at odds with common assumptions about the relative impact of prosaic social situations and everyday communicative exchange on psychological functioning. This paper revisits the too-long-overlooked relation between hypnosis and human development, aiming to understand hidden, yet powerful sociogenetic processes in development that are exposed in hypnosis. Hypnosis, as a process of interpersonal exchange, not only provides empirical evidence that such factors *can* dramatically influence intramental functioning, it also affords appreciation of *how* such influences occur.

The following analysis is guided by assumptions that also influenced Vygotsky, Freud and a host of others who have used hypnosis as a source of insight into human development: Hypnosis is not the product of special powers manifest only in the hypnotic situation. All contemporary approaches presume that hypnosis results from more general processes of social influence, interpersonal communication and sociocognitive functioning (Lynn & Rhue, 1991). The remarkable effects of hypnosis derive from the particular arrangement of interpersonal, communicative, sociopsychological relationships essential to hypnosis—which also characterize child–caregiver relationships. Thus, if a brief encounter in hypnosis can radically alter basic psychological functioning in adults, then similar effects can be expected in comparable developmental contexts with children, whose psychological functioning is less stable and mature.

We begin with an analysis of the communicative means by which hypnotic influence is achieved. This is followed by an examination of intrapsychic phenomena that result from hypnotic engagement: nonvolition, hypnotic amnesia, posthypnotic suggestion and analgesia. These demonstrate how interpersonal exchange can dramatically alter memory, perception, beliefs, and organic functioning. The bidirectional nature of exchange is then examined, underscoring that influence can lead to surprising outcomes. The narrative line is provided by topics in hypnosis, and the developmental parallels and implications are explored after each topic is addressed.

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