



Does ‘hypnosis’ by any other name smell as sweet? The efficacy of ‘hypnotic’ inductions depends on the label ‘hypnosis’

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Received 18 April 2004

Available online 5 February 2005

Abstract

Hypnosis is associated with profound changes in conscious experience and is increasingly used as a cognitive tool to explore neuropsychological processes. Studies of this sort typically employ suggestions following a hypnotic induction to produce changes in perceptual experience and motor control. It is not clear, however, to what extent the induction procedure serves to facilitate suggested phenomena. This study investigated the effect on suggestibility of (a) a hypnotic induction and (b) labelling that procedure ‘hypnosis.’ Suggestibility of participants was tested before and after an adapted hypnotic procedure, which was either labelled as ‘hypnosis’ or as ‘relaxation.’ The hypnotic procedure produced a modest increase in suggestibility when it was called ‘relaxation,’ but a very significant increase if it was labelled ‘hypnosis.’ The results are important for both clinical and experimental applications and indicate that labelling an induction procedure ‘hypnosis’ is an important determinant of subsequent responses to suggestion.

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Keywords: Suggestion; Suggestibility; Hypnosis; Hypnotizability; Induction; Labelling; Expectancy; Consciousness; Involuntariness; Effect size

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1. Introduction

What's in a name? that which we call a rose,
By any other name would smell as sweet.
W. Shakespeare, *Romeo & Juliet*, 1595–96.

Hypnosis procedures are able to produce dramatic, but reversible, changes in the way in which individuals experience themselves, the environment and the voluntariness of their own actions. The resulting hypnotic phenomena present challenges for our understanding of conscious experience but also hold the promise of new insights. Commenting on a recent study by Haggard, Cartledge, Dafydd, and Oakley (2004) in which hypnosis was used to create the experience of involuntariness during the execution of a voluntary finger movement Pockett (2004) concluded that the reported effects had “far-reaching implications for questions about the nature of hypnosis, the role of belief in brain function and the means by which we perceive our own body movements, as well as the neurophysiology of free-will” (p. 624).

Despite its intrinsic interest, its potential as an adjunctive procedure in therapy and more than 200 years of scientific investigation, hypnosis has remained an elusive concept for science and on the periphery of mainstream psychology. More recently, however, it has become accepted that cognitive theories of willed and automatic behaviour (e.g., Bargh & Chartrand, 1996; Hilgard, 1977; Norman & Shallice, 1986; Shallice, 1988) are central to an understanding of the mechanisms that underlie hypnotic phenomena and contemporary scientific theories of hypnosis (e.g., Brown & Oakley, 2004; Hilgard, 1977; Kirsch & Lynn, 1997; Oakley, 1999; Spanos & Chaves, 1989; Woody & Bowers, 1994) based on these cognitive concepts provide promising frameworks within which we can use hypnosis procedures to explore, manipulate, and control normal neuropsychological processes. There have also been recent attempts to assess systematically the efficacy of hypnosis as an adjunct to psychological and pharmacological therapies, (e.g., Kirsch, Montgomery, & Sapirstein, 1995; Patterson & Jensen, 2003) as well as its cost-saving role in health care (e.g., Lang et al., 2000; Lang & Rosen, 2002).

Most importantly though in relation to the study to be presented below, there has also been an upsurge in interest in the use of hypnosis as a tool to study cognitive phenomena. Recent studies have integrated experiential–phenomenological methods and neuroscience (e.g., Price, Barrell, & Rainville, 2002; Singer et al., 2004) and this has undoubtedly contributed to a supportive climate for using a procedure such as hypnosis in this way as a cognitive tool. Hypnosis has been shown to modulate pain perception (Faymonville et al., 2000; Rainville, Duncan, Price, Carrier, & Bushnell, 1997); visual perception (Kosslyn, Thompson, Constatini-Ferrando, Alpert, & Spiegel, 2000); auditory perception (Szechtman, Woody, Bowers, & Nahimas, 1998); attention (MacLeod & Sheehan, 2003; Raz, Shapiro, Fan, & Posner, 2002); intentionality (Halligan, Athwal, Oakley, & Frackowiak, 2000; Oakley, Ward, Halligan, & Frackowiak, 2003; Ward, Oakley, Frackowiak, & Halligan, 2003); and awareness of control (Blakemore, Oakley, & Frith, 2003; Haggard et al., 2004). The fact that many of these studies have incorporated functional neuroimaging techniques has been particularly influential in raising the profile of hypnosis as an effective cognitive tool.

With the increasing use of hypnosis in clinical practice and the harnessing of hypnosis by cognitive neuroscientists as a means of illuminating mental processes, a central issue that arises for

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