

COMMENTARY

**Comments on Crabtree’s “Hypnosis Reconsidered,
Resituated, and Redefined”**

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I was very stimulated by Adam Crabtree’s article, and also a little embarrassed. I am always preaching to colleagues that you should be sensitive to the implicit and cultural assumptions you make, so how in the world could I have been so blithely ignorant of the cultural assumptions built into the process of defining hypnosis by biased lists of phenomena?

I began reading extensively in the hypnosis literature as a young man, and by the time I was in my second year of college was quite well-informed about what was known at that time. I had seen many lists of hypnotic phenomena, and while intellectually I questioned the idea of “Authorities” in general—what young person doesn’t?—at that age I was still pretty accepting that the Authorities¹ on hypnosis knew what they were talking about. I was aware that modern writers on hypnosis prejudicially left out any mention of the apparent parapsychological aspects of hypnosis, but I assumed they were otherwise accurate.

The Fallibility of Authorities

I received a major shock in my acceptance of Authorities in general and particularly the Authorities on hypnosis when the best-selling book *The Search for Bridey Murphy* was published in 1956 (Bernstein 1956). The author, Morey Bernstein, a businessman and amateur hypnotist, reported on his experiments in regressing an anonymous woman back before her birth, where, in a number of sessions, she reported various descriptive items about living a life in Ireland as one Bridey Murphy. In a fast reaction to the book, a number of the most prominent Authorities on hypnosis published “A Scientific Report on *The Search for Bridey Murphy*” (Kline 1956). I opened that book with great interest, since I had found the Bernstein book quite interesting, and was looking forward to seeing what

scientific parties could add. What I found instead was that people who were otherwise genuine authorities about hypnosis, psychology, medicine, etc., simply became totally angry and irrational when it came to the topic of reincarnation. Their criticisms of what they claimed had been said in Bernstein's book were so inaccurate that I had to go back and reread the book. I couldn't believe that their anger at the very idea of reincarnation could cause them to become so distorted in their perceptions and thoughts, but it had.

Note that the vast majority of my mainstream colleagues in hypnosis research constantly stressed that there were no weird things like recall of past lives associated with hypnosis, hypnosis was scientific and science had no place for things like that. Past life recall was not included in the various lists of defining hypnotic phenomena. I don't think readers of this *Journal* will automatically feel angry that I am mentioning hypnosis and past life recall, but if any of you feel some of that, keep that feeling available to inspect in the last part of this Commentary . . . it's relevant.

Nevertheless I did not really question the phenomena lists as a primary way of defining hypnosis, although in my own development of my systems theory approach to altered states of consciousness many years later (Tart 1975) I paid little attention to specific phenomena and looked at the dynamics and interrelationships of various subsystems of consciousness instead. But in the back of my mind, the definition of hypnosis by prominent phenomena was still intact. So I want to again thank Adam Crabtree for making me realize how questionable this approach is, especially when it is implicit, beyond rational questioning.

Crabtree proposes a fresh look at hypnosis that

. . . situates hypnosis as a subspecies of *trance* as defined in a very specific way: a state of profound focus on something accompanied by a diminished awareness of everything else, which evokes appropriate subliminal resources. *Hypnosis* is then defined as an inner-mind trance characterized by rapport. (Crabtree 2012)

I certainly think this will be a useful approach, although, as he recognizes, it's going to require a considerable increase in our knowledge of things like "rapport," "trance," and what the "subliminal" is. As I think these are important realities that have been too long neglected in contemporary psychology, that's excellent! I don't know that Crabtree's approach will turn out to be the definitive approach, but it's certainly worth trying.

A Related Problem—Hypnosis is Weird and Eerie

I want to add one extra consideration to Crabtree's stimulating discussion, though, and that is that perhaps some of our difficulty in understanding hypnosis is that there is something just plain "eerie" about it. Eerie in and of itself, not simply because of historical associations with the occult.

I concentrated on hypnosis research in the early part of my career, and for all the intellectual understanding I had of various aspects of it, and for all the ways I could appear to be (and was, by contemporary standards) an authority in talking about it, I know that I still basically don't understand what was happening in hypnosis, and what was happening could be downright weird.

In Ernest Hilgard's hypnosis research laboratory at Stanford, for example, where I did my postdoctoral training, one of our standard hypnotizability scale items for talented hypnotic subjects was anosmia to ammonia. After going through the procedure to hypnotize subjects—and since these were highly selected individuals I will assume they were genuinely hypnotized at this point—we had standard instructions, to be read to the subject for half a minute or so, to the effect that the subject could not smell anything. I would announce then that I was going to put something odorous under her nose and ask her to take a good sniff, but the deeply hypnotized subject would not smell anything. When this worked, I would be quite amazed, although, as a professional, I didn't show my reaction to the subject. I saw many people take a deep sniff of the bottle of household ammonia or even stronger ammonia one inch away from their nostrils *and not show the slightest reaction*. When asked if they smelled anything they would say no, but the lack of overt reaction was far more impressive.

Ammonia is not simply a strong smell, *it is extremely painful* in high concentration. When I would try to sniff it my head would snap back to get away from the pain! I could imagine someone training themselves over long periods to suppress their reaction to this kind of pain, but not when it came for the first time in their life, unexpectedly.

If you want to get a good feeling for how eerie this kind of reaction is, take a sniff of household ammonia yourself. But I strongly suggest that you start from several inches away and don't inhale very deeply! It hurts!

Theories as Defense Against the Eerie?

Insofar as I am correct that we can have uncomfortable emotional reactions to some of the phenomena of hypnosis, to the strange and eerie, analgesia and ostensible past life recall to mention just two, this also means that a lot of the conventional theories of hypnosis have a hidden agenda, namely to

“explain away” the mysterious. A way of saying “There’s nothing strange going on here, we are in control, we understand everything important!” While there is much truth in the role-taking type theories for many subjects—some subjects are indeed primarily acting the role of the hypnotized subject—seeing someone as “just acting” is a lot easier on our social conditioning than believing someone really can become immune to, say, extreme pain, or regress to an earlier age, or, to bring back the suppressed, show clairvoyant knowledge of the world, or retrieve valid memories of a past life.

Experimenter Bias

Of course we’re all very attached to our self-concept as objective scientists, who are just getting at the facts, not being influenced in our observations or theorizing by implicit or explicit emotions. Yes, that’s our goal as scientists for collecting the facts, but thinking that’s the end of the story is a recipe for disaster. I personally take the attitude that while I have a strong motivation to want the truth about things, I am biased in most things I do, including formal experiments, so I must allow for the possibility of some kind of bias distorting results, and see what I can do to prevent that from happening. If instead I simply take refuge in a self-concept of being objective, I allow biases a wide play.

One of the most amazing things in my career as a psychologist was to see that the question of *experimenter bias* and *demand characteristics* raised by investigators like Rosenthal (1963) and Orne (1962) was so central to our scientific enterprise—and then to see how quickly interest in it disappeared! My own small contribution to studying such bias showed that experienced professionals, knowing they were being checked for bias in a hypnosis experiment, nevertheless showed such bias (Troffer & Tart 1964). When I look at the way most interest in experimenter bias simply disappeared from mainstream psychology, I can’t help but think of suppression and repression in the service of the ego, in the service of supporting our belief in our superiority because of our vaunted objectivity. So besides thanking Crabtree for bringing one of our assumptions to consciousness where it now seems to be quite questionable, I would like to add the recommendation that we start looking at our experiments on hypnosis and other phenomena with openness to the fact that we may be biased in various ways, and asking what we can do about that.

Note

¹ I will capitalize authority, viz. Authority, when I want to emphasize the implicit, irrational reactions we often have to authority figures.

References

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