

When in Doubt, Forbear!

Commentary: On the Centrality of the Concept of an Altered State to Definitions of Hypnosis.

Jean Roch Laurence, PhD*

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Does it really matter at this point in time that the interested scientific community agrees to a single definition of ‘hypnosis’? Would accepting to label hypnosis an *alleged* altered state do the trick? Or is it simply that Wagstaff is proposing to replace the hypnosis in quotation marks à la Barber by the word *alleged*?

One of Wagstaff’s central argument is that as theoretical explanations of hypnotic effects have diversified and complexified over time, we have distanced ourselves from our roots. Did we really? Was animal magnetism or lucid sleep or artificial somnambulism clearly seen as altered states by their proponents? Certainly not by Mesmer who conceived of animal magnetism as a neuro-physiological process nor by Faria who linked the *épointes* (somnambulists) in part to a physiological condition, thin blood. If a participant proved difficult to magnetize, blood letting would do marvels. Thin blood was a necessary although not sufficient condition. Faria identified a number of individual differences that needed to be present in the participant. One of these was the capacity to misattribute the effects experienced to the influence of the magnetist. De Puységur was probably the closest one to mention a curious state in the somnambulist that transcended the natural state of affairs. But then again, he used to magnetize his servants over which he had the right of life and death... (see Ellenberger, 1965, for a sociological view of de Puységur’s somnambule).

Wagstaff travels back to Hénin de Cuvillers (1820) who was the first to suggest using words stemming from the Greek *hupnos*, meaning sleep. He is quite correct. However, Hénin de Cuvillers was merely listing Greek words’ roots that could be appropriate for the new phenomenon in an attempt to distance himself from the pretensions of the Animal Magnetists and in some way the Puységurian somnambulists. He proposed more than 650 words derived from Greek that he thought could be appropriate. In the long run we did not fare too bad with *hypnotism*; it could have been *Phantasiéxoussisme* (see Gauld, 1992). All this to say that claiming that our roots originated with the coining of the word hypnotism is not quite accurate; it may reflect the fact that there was from then on a consensus on labeling the process but not in identifying what the process was; at best a metaphor, an as-if proposition: naming a new phenomenon on the basis of its resemblance to what is known... and to, once again, distance oneself from the delusions and exaggerations of magnetists. Even though there may have been consensus about the label, it was not very long for theoreticians to once again disagree. Whereas Bernheim saw hypnosis as a normal psychological response to suggestions, most of his contemporaries were following Charcot who conceived of hypnosis as a pathological process, a kind of latent hysteria. Indeed, it is not until the twentieth century and the undue influence of the psychoanalytic discourse that hypnosis was clearly theorized of as an altered state of

Professor in the
Department of Psychology,
Concordia University, Montreal,
Québec, H4B 1R6,
Canada

e-mail: jr.laurence@concordia.ca

consciousness rather than the word *altered* being used in a convenient, descriptive, as-if metaphor.

Wagstaff writes at length about the notion of hypnotic depth. The notion of hypnotic depth is also a reflection of the underlying theories that were espoused by different theorists whether they were linked to the sleep metaphor in the early nineteenth century or depth psychology later on. At the end of the nineteenth century the Nancy school linked the depth of hypnosis to the number of items passed not the depth of the state. For a long time hypnotic depth scales provided participants with the actual items that should be passed at each level (Laurence and Nadon, 1986). La Salpêtrière took a very different approach to explain the variability of responses. They rather described hypnotic types (basically three) rather than one dimension of depth. The notion of types is certainly an interesting one as it bypasses the fact that many participants do not respond or respond minimally to suggestions. Typology however has not fared too well since few theorists have espoused or developed the idea. Nonetheless, most typical contemporary standardized inductions (like the Harvard Scale) are still worded along the depth dimension. As participants relax, they will experience a deeper state of hypnosis; can't really be surprised that depth scores correlate quite well with performance scores. As Laurence and Nadon (1986) already observed depth reports are indexing the experiential changes more than the behavioral ones and maybe reflecting both the expectations and dispositions of the participants over and above their actual behavioral responses. Experienced depth may mean very little other than the participants espousing the metaphors we provide them.

Hypnosis (and the alleged depth of it) may be at best metaphors for an ensemble of phenomena that we either do not grasp yet, that is simply too complex to summarize in a few words or that may be explained by seemingly irreconcilable theoretical viewpoints.

If anything, reading Wagstaff demonstrates that we have come a long way since Gill (1972) depiction of hypnosis as a

regression in the service of the ego... and the centrality of an altered state... Why go back?

Wagstaff is certainly correct in saying that most contemporary definitions proposed by scientific or clinical bodies are not saying what hypnosis is but rather how it is applied and what to expect from the procedure. Dictionaries and encyclopedias are more daring. They clearly label hypnosis an altered state of consciousness. Dictionaries and encyclopedias represent most of the time a consensual understanding by non-specialists of the phenomena they describe. They do not get involved in the theoretical battles of the research world. Is it necessarily a bad thing? No. In fact, if I believe Wagstaff (and the relevant research) we should be quite happy about these lay definitions. They bring food on the table for the hypnotist... and they are quite useful in bringing forth expected results. It is a win-win situation.

Would agreeing to the new definitions as proposed by Wagstaff change anything? My guess is no. An *alleged* state is not a definition; it is the contrary of a definition. If we do not know what it is, then we should stick to a simple descriptive and operational approach. If I were a CBT practitioner reading Wagstaff, I would be quite worried that the definition of my trade could be hypnosis. But then could I really explain how restructuring brings cognitive and emotional changes, other than once again using vague terminology? It certainly seems to me that in the absence of a clear answer, emphasizing vagueness and uncertainty is not the answer. It certainly won't stop disagreements. For one, I would disagree. I do not believe that a hypnotized individual is in an altered state, merely in one of many variations of a normal state of consciousness. The basic premise of the social-psychological approach was not to deny that hypnotized individuals believe to be in an altered state. They merely pointed out that one does not need that concept to explain what is experienced during hypnosis. To cite Wagstaff and Cole (2005):

The main thrust of the nonstate criticism of hypnosis as an ASC has not been to deny that hypnotic subjects experience ASCs, but

that the concept of an ASC unique to hypnosis is unhelpful (and even misleading) in explaining the phenomena we associate with hypnosis (including reports of ASCs themselves; Wagstaff, 2005, p. 15).

An alleged altered state would not fare better. Which brings me to the definition of a normal state of consciousness. Oops! That's right, we do not really have a unified definition of what is a normal state of consciousness, other than as vague and diverse as they can be. Bummer! Then how do we identify what is an altered state of consciousness? If one agrees with Revonsuo et al's (2009) definition of an altered state, it would be a state that misrepresents the actual state of affairs internally or externally. Do the hypnotic induction procedures misrepresent internal or external reality? Most likely not. In fact what the participants report is well in line with what is happening and what they are led to expect. They feel relaxed and comfortable. It is only once specific suggestions are administered that participants may report some misrepresentational aspects of reality.

Wagstaff is correct in describing the hypnotic induction as orienting expectations that an altered state will happen. Indeed,

most studies that have looked at expectations of what happens in hypnosis found them to be reasonably good predictors of hypnotic responses. The context is relevant in as much as participants also have the abilities to produce the suggested effects. So the idea of an altered state (alleged or not) is quite irrelevant from the experimenter's point of view. As Faria wrote, it is the participant that needs to misattribute, not the experimenter.

Would defining hypnosis as an alleged altered state help us understand better what is happening when participants volunteer to be hypnotized? Most likely not. Would it really help researchers and clinicians get a better sense of what they are doing or studying? Most likely not either. The answer really is not to be found in the definition of hypnosis at this point, simply because we still do not understand what exactly is happening during hypnosis.

In the end I will have to pass on Wagstaff's propositions and suggest that we continue to live with a descriptive, operational definition, and enjoy the theoretical battles until we can have some better idea of the actual mechanisms at play during hypnosis.

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