

Wagstaff's Definition of Hypnosis

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

Irving Kirsch, PhD*

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As Wagstaff (this issue) notes, finding a definition of hypnosis upon which hypnosis scholars can agree has proven to be a herculean task that has eluded the best efforts of individuals and committees. Wagstaff's proposed revision of the APA definition of hypnosis (American Psychological Association, 1994), which is the last paragraph of his article, is one of the best I have seen. Whether it succeeds in achieving a consensus among hypnosis scholars remains to be seen, but it has much to recommend it. The inclusion of the term *alleged* is especially important, as it is noncommittal with respect to the question of whether hypnotic procedures produce a specifically hypnotic state. This may allow acceptance of the definition by scholars with substantially different theoretical views on the subject. It also insures that hypnosis can exist even if the alleged altered state does not, in the same way that séances exist even if communication with the dead does not.

There are two approaches to defining hypnosis (Kirsch et al., 2011). One is a narrow definition in which hypnosis is linked to the administration of a hypnotic induction (Kirsch, et al., 2011) or the acceptance of the idea that one is in a hypnotic state (Wagstaff, this issue). There is also a broader approach to defining hypnosis, according to which hypnosis is defined as a domain of characteristic phenomena, central to which is the administration of imaginative suggestions (Hilgard, 1973). Imaginative suggestions is a term coined by Braffman and Kirsch (Braffman & Kirsch, 1999) to describe the kinds of suggestions used in hypnosis scales, as distinct from other types of

suggestion (e.g., those associated with the placebo effect and the misinformation effect). Broadly defined, the domain of hypnosis includes responding to imaginative suggestions without the induction of hypnosis, regardless of the presence or absence of a hypnotic state.

Preferences between these narrow and broad approaches to defining hypnosis vary and do not seem correlated with theoretical stances on the altered state issue (Kirsch, et al., 2011). Wagstaff (this issue) argues strongly for a narrow definition. Although I do not have a strong preference and have vacillated greatly on the issue, I think that some of his objections can be countered easily. Wagstaff argues that a broad definition leads to contorted terminology, such as 'hypnotic hypnosis' and 'hypnotic non-hypnosis'. However, this results from mixing narrow and broad definitions. Consistent use of terms from one or the other need not result in verbal contortions.

A central concern that Wagstaff raises is that any definition that does not include the notion of an altered state loses sight of the etymological origins of the term. However, there are many examples of scientific definitions that have been changed in response to empirical and theoretical advances. According to most dictionary definitions, for example, gravity is a force by which bodies are drawn towards each other. According to the theory of general relativity, however, gravity is not a force. Instead, it is a byproduct the curvature of spacetime. So, should we neutralize or water down the definition of gravity, or should we respect the etymological roots of the term, keep the concept of an attractive force

* Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Harvard Medical School, 330 Brookline Ave, Boston, MA, 02215

School of Psychology, Plymouth University, Drake Circus, Plymouth, Devon, PL4 8AA, UK

e-mail: i.kirsch@hull.ac.uk

as central to its definition, and then conclude that gravity does not exist?

Here are examples closer to home. For the last century, the terms *mesmerism* and *animal magnetism* have been considered synonymous with *hypnosis*. This can be seen in common dictionary definitions of mesmerism and in Binet and Féré's (1888) classic work on animal magnetism, where they state that "magnetism and hypnotism are fundamentally synonymous terms (p. 67)." So are mesmerism and animal magnetism hypnosis? Only if we accept definitions that Mesmer and his followers would never have recognized. And let us not forget that original definition of hypnosis was "nervous sleep" (Braid, 1843). If we were to be true to our etymological origins, nervous sleep would remain the definition of hypnosis, and we would all have to agree that hypnosis does not exist.

One of the problems in defining hypnosis is its relation to hypnotizability. If hypnosis is defined as a hypothesized altered state (albeit one with unknown or disputed characteristics), then what we call hypnotizability, as conventionally measured, is a misnomer (Kirsch, 1997; Weitzenhoffer, 1980). Wagstaff (this issue) is well aware of this, and given his definition of hypnosis, he is correct in noting that self-report hypnotic depth scales are the most direct measures of hypnotizability. If hypnosis is the acceptance of the suggestion to enter a hypnotic state, then the experience of that state is its operational definition.

Responses to suggestion are measures of suggestibility, not of hypnotizability. However, Wagstaff then goes on to suggest that current "hypnotizability" scales, which measure suggestibility, can be used as indirect proxy measures of hypnotizability, because of their high correlation with hypnotic depth scales. This may put us on a slippery slope, as there is already a tendency to confuse hypnotizability with primary or imaginative suggestibility. Furthermore, the correlation holds only if a hypnotic induction has been used. In the absence of a hypnotic induction, highly suggestible people respond well to hypnotic suggestion but rate themselves as not being hypnotized (Mazzoni et al., 2009). More important, why should we use proxy measures, when valid and reliable direct measures are available? We should use intelligence tests rather than socio economic status to measure intelligence, and blood alcohol levels rather than impulsiveness to measure intoxication. Similarly, if we adopt Wagstaff's (this issue) proposed definition of hypnosis, we should use hypnotic depth scales, not suggestibility scales, to measure hypnotizability.

Despite these quibbles, Wagstaff's (this issue) article is an important contribution to the ongoing discussion about definitions of hypnosis and hypnotizability. His proposed definition is as good or better than any narrow definition of hypnosis that I have seen and should be considered seriously as a contender consensual adoption.

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