

Defining Hypnosis: Altered States and the Need for Parsimony

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

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March, 2014

Wagstaff's paper (this issue) argues that definitions of hypnosis should include the concept of an altered state in line with the original etymology of the term "hypnosis." In this commentary, I focus on two limitations of Wagstaff's account: the ambiguity of the term altered state and problems defining hypnosis as increased suggestibility. I argue that definitions of hypnosis need not refer to an altered state or increased suggestibility to be meaningful in the way that Wagstaff claims.

DEFINING HYPNOSIS AS AN ALTERED STATE

Wagstaff seems to offer two main arguments for why a concept of an altered state is necessary for defining hypnosis. In his first argument, Wagstaff claims that definitions that focus only on the procedures of hypnosis (like the American Psychological Association definitions) are inadequate. According to Wagstaff, such definitions miss the essence of hypnosis, which is the effects that it produces, and lead to conceptual difficulties by equating hypnosis and suggestion. Wagstaff asserts that these problems are avoided by accepting that hypnosis involves an altered state or trance. In his second argument, Wagstaff identifies two opposing views of hypnosis—"the first more consistent with the idea of hypnosis as a trance, or altered state, the second leaning more towards what is now known as the sociocognitive position on hypnosis, which tends to reject, or at least place less emphasis on, the concept

of a hypnotic altered state. . ." (p. 96)—and notes that both involve the concept of an altered state. Given empirical evidence that the hypnotic context—which Wagstaff considers to be akin to a suggestion itself—plays a role in suggestibility, Wagstaff summarises the two positions as either "an altered state that can exist independent of suggestion, or . . . the acceptance of a suggestion that one is in such a state" (p. 102). Wagstaff concludes that both positions "use the idea of hypnosis as an altered state as a central or core concept in *defining* the concept of hypnosis" (p. 102, italics in original).

I suggest that both arguments are flawed. Regarding the first argument, I agree—as others have already pointed out (Nash, 2005)—that a purely procedural definition of hypnosis is inadequate. Nevertheless, it does not follow from this that one needs to accept the notion of an altered state or trance. One only needs to distinguish the procedure of hypnosis—the induction and suggestions—from its products—the alterations in perception, memory, and action that it entails—and include both aspects in the definition (Barnier & Nash, 2008; Nash, 2005). Hypnosis-as-product does not necessarily involve an altered state or trance—whether it does depends on how the ambiguous constructs of altered state and trance are defined, which is an issue that I will return to later. These constructs, however, are certainly not necessary to define hypnosis or to express the reality of hypnotic phenomena. Indeed, even the distinction that Wagstaff draws between

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hypnotic suggestibility (responsiveness to suggestions whilst in the hypnotic state) and hypnotic susceptibility (the ability to enter a hypnotic state) can be expressed without invoking the construct of state: that is, as responsiveness to suggestions and self-perceived engagement in the overall hypnotic experience respectively.

Regarding the second argument, I disagree with the proposal that it is necessary or desirable to use the term “altered state” simply because two supposedly opposing theoretical viewpoints can be expressed using this term. Putting aside whether this dichotomy of theoretical viewpoints is meaningful, Wagstaff seems to use the term altered state in two different ways to characterise the two positions. He observes, for example, that hypnosis is “either an altered state that exists independently of suggestion, or it involves acceptance of a suggestion for one.” (p. 102). These two viewpoints involve different conceptions of an altered state in terms of what it actually is and the extent to which it can be differentiated from suggestion. Contrary to Wagstaff’s view, the different ways in which the term “state” is used in these two accounts suggests the need for caution when using this term.

Indeed, despite discussing definitions of hypnosis in great detail, Wagstaff does not offer a definition of what constitutes an altered state. When discussing limitations of his “generic trance hypothesis,” Wagstaff refers to definitions of altered states of consciousness offered by Tart (in which a person feels as if their mental functioning is different) and Farthing (in which a person believes that their mental functioning is different). It is not clear if Wagstaff accepts these definitions in the context of hypnosis. However, both definitions—at least as quoted by Wagstaff—define an altered state entirely in terms of the subject’s own self-report, which may overlook other aspects of hypnosis, such as the interpersonal interaction involved and the behavioural responses that it can produce. Although the implication seems to be that hypnosis involves experiences and behaviours that are not usually present in everyday life, the precise definition of the

construct of altered state is not clearly defined. This is problematic because it is a term that can be interpreted in different ways.

As others have already noted, defining an altered state can be difficult and prone to misinterpretation (Cardeña, 2011; Hilgard, 1980; Kihlstrom, 2005, 2007, 2008). It can be unclear, for example, whether the term altered state is intended to be merely descriptive (indicating that some alteration in consciousness is present) or whether it is intended to offer explanatory power (indicating that it plays some role in causing an alteration in consciousness; see Hilgard, 1969; Kileen & Nash, 2004; Nash, 2005). In a similar way, there is the related danger of reifying an altered state as an entity separate from the organism that experiences it (Bunge, 1980). It can also be unclear the extent to which an altered state is a uniform and unchanging entity—as the term implies—and the extent to which an altered state remains discrete from other states (Cardeña, 2011; Hilgard, 1969; Kihlstrom, 2008). Given these ambiguities and the potential for misinterpretation, it may be prudent to avoid using the term “altered state” in a definition of hypnosis unless this term is also clearly defined.

DISTINGUISHING HYPNOSIS FROM OTHER ALTERED STATES

Wagstaff’s definition of hypnosis also involves the notion of increased suggestibility. Wagstaff notes that hypnosis shares many characteristics with everyday experiences (e.g., day dreaming) and other altered states (e.g., meditation) in terms of subjective feelings of relaxation and their effects on attention. According to Wagstaff, however, these other experiences and states do not necessarily involve an increase in suggestibility in the same way as hypnosis. Wagstaff observes that what distinguishes hypnosis from these other experiences and states is a hypnotic context—a label that the experience is hypnotic. Wagstaff notes evidence that increased suggestibility can occur after relaxation or meditation—or even in conditions of alertness and physiological arousal—so long as it is referred to as hypnotic. According to Wagstaff, this labelling of the context as hypnotic is akin to a separate

“suggestion to the hypnotic subject that he or she is entering an altered state of consciousness we call ‘hypnosis’” (p. 99) and this “suggestion for hypnosis” (p. 99) is necessary to produce the increased suggestibility that is a defining feature of hypnosis.

Both increased suggestibility and a hypnotic context, however, are not critical to hypnosis. As Wagstaff acknowledges, increased suggestibility is not always present after a hypnotic induction. Indeed, participants can experience alterations in perception, memory, and action without a hypnotic induction and outside of an explicit hypnotic context (Hilgard, 1965). In addition, all these alterations can be produced by posthypnotic suggestion—that is, a suggestion to experience a hypnotic effect after hypnosis has been formally terminated when a particular cue is presented. It is not immediately clear how posthypnotic suggestion can be reconciled with Wagstaff’s view of the hypnotic context as a suggestion itself (does a posthypnotic suggestion imply a second suggestion to re-enter a hypnotic state?). In any case, these counter-examples indicate that both increased suggestibility and a hypnotic context are not necessary for a definition of hypnosis.

DEFINING HYPNOSIS

Rather than increased suggestibility or a hypnotic context, hypnosis is perhaps better characterised by the alterations in

perception, memory, and action that it can produce. Somewhat surprisingly, Wagstaff does not refer to Kihlstrom’s (1985, pp. 385–386) canonical definition of hypnosis:

Hypnosis is a process in which one person, designated the hypnotist, offers suggestions to another person, designated the subject, for imaginative experiences entailing alterations in perception, memory and action. In the classic case, these experiences are associated with a degree of subjective conviction bordering on delusion, and an experienced involuntariness bordering on compulsion. As such, the phenomena of hypnosis reflect alterations in consciousness that take place in the context of a social interaction.

Such a definition does not suffer from the problems that Wagstaff identifies with other definitions of hypnosis. It also does not suffer from the problems that I suggest are in Wagstaff’s own account.

Wagstaff notes that the term “hypnosis” was originally derived from a Greek word for sleep, and came to be associated with the idea of an altered state. In the same way that hypnosis is no longer defined in terms of sleep, hypnosis need not be defined in terms of an altered state. Rather than attempting to accommodate the etymological origins of the term as Wagstaff proposes, it is more important to ensure that a definition is parsimonious and not open to misinterpretation.

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