Hypnotism and suggestion

Citation for published version:
https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.013.635

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.013.635

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology

Publisher Rights Statement:
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Hypnotism and Suggestion: A Historical Perspective

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Summary

Franz Anton Mesmer’s theory of “animal magnetism” proposed that living organisms possess an invisible magnetic fluid, which can be influenced by a “magnetizer” and, by doing so, a variety of illnesses can be cured. Contemporaries, such as the Marquis de Puysegur, took a more psychological view, claiming that a state of “artificial somnambulism” could be induced, through which alternate states of consciousness, and clairvoyant powers, could be exhibited. Public demonstrations of mesmeric phenomena, from insensibility to pain to clairvoyance, convinced many that there was something to it, whether as a medical tool or, perhaps, as evidence of supernatural powers. The distinction between mesmerism and hypnotism, made explicit in the writings of James Braid, distinguished between such phenomena, attributing the latter to fraud, and the former to suggestion. With the decline of mesmerism, facilitated in part by Braid’s theory and the introduction of chemical anesthesia, the more extraordinary phenomena of mesmerism, and the concept of a mysterious force, became part of the spiritualist and mind-cure movements, and the basis of psychical research.
In the last quarter of the 19th century, a revival of scientific interest in hypnotism in France led to a dispute between two schools of thought: in Paris, hypnosis was explained in terms of an inherited pathological disposition; in Nancy, it was regarded as a normal process, and the product of suggestion. Hypnosis was used to explore the “dissociation” of personality and “sub-conscious” processes, provoking various theories about alternate selves in the normal and abnormal mind. At the turn of the 20th century, while clinical interest continued, experimental interest turned to the concepts of suggestion and suggestibility, which had practical educational, political, legal, and commercial relevance. A new line of hypnosis research, based on experimental, quantitative methods with normal subjects, began in the United States in the 1920s, and concluded that hypnosis was nothing more than suggestion. In the second half of the century, renewed scientific interest led to competing theories that explained hypnosis either in terms of a hypnotic state or else in terms of social roles. The dispute between “state” and “no state” theories was accompanied by a debate over the existence of a stable individual trait that might explain individual differences in hypnotizability. Meanwhile, as the effects of social influence became a significant topic of study, the implications for psychology experiments were considered in terms of “demand characteristics” and “experimenter effects.” In the last quarter of the 20th century, there was significant interest in legal issues relating to hypnosis, particularly concerning “recovered memory,” and the accusation that false memories and multiple personalities were the product of suggestion. As debates about the nature of hypnosis continue, the descendants of mesmerism, from “anomalous cognition” to “social priming,” which provoked recent debates about the limits of psychological methods, demonstrate the ongoing relevance of studying the boundaries of the mind.

Keywords
Introduction

In 1784, a French royal commission investigated the existence of “animal magnetism” in response to the controversy surrounding the claims of Franz Anton Mesmer. According to Mesmer, living bodies contained a magnetic fluid, and by realigning this fluid, a variety of illnesses could be cured. It was not the only radical medical treatment available in Paris at the time (Sutton, 1981), nor was it entirely unprecedented. Trance states and other phenomena that came to be associated with hypnotism appear to have been around for millennia, and in a variety of cultures (Hammond, 2013), and similar kinds of healing practices were described in ancient Greece, though treating these as the origins of hypnotism is a quite different matter (Stam & Spanos, 1982). Even in Mesmer’s time, Johann Gassner, a German priest, was reportedly producing related kinds of cures, but in the context of exorcism (Peter, 2005). Mesmer, on the other hand, presented what he did in natural, rather than supernatural, terms. He offered cures to wealthy Parisians, gaining a reputation among many as a man with remarkable powers, and among others as a charlatan. The commissioners, a group that included such eminent individuals such as Antoine Lavoisier and Benjamin Franklin, conducted a variety of experiments with subjects, including ones in which subjects were blindfolded so that they were unaware of when they were being “magnetized.” In the process, subjects often behaved as if they had been magnetized, when they only thought that they had been. The conclusion of the investigating committee was that “animal magnetism” did not exist, and that the effects upon subjects could be attributed to the imagination (Darnton, 1968; Pattie, 1994).
By then, the Marquis de Puysegur, a former student of Mesmer, had already begun to experiment with subjects, and had produced a state of “artificial somnambulism”: a state of consciousness akin to sleepwalking, in which the subject appeared to be in an intimate “rapport” with the magnetizer, and responsive to the will of the latter. Observing that, when the subject awoke, he had no memory of what had happened (though when he returned to a state of somnambulism, his memory of what had happened returned), and that he appeared to display a different personality when in trance, Puysegur concluded that these two states constituted two separate existences. In doing so, he provided a new way of understanding symptoms that previously would have been categorized as possession (Crabtree, 1993). He also believed that the somnambulistic state permitted certain clairvoyant abilities, such that some subjects could diagnose illness and prescribe treatment not only for their own illness, but also those of others (Dingwall, 1967a; Gauld, 1995).

There were other investigations into the matter, of course, which produced a variety of conclusions about the facts relating to animal magnetism, all of which were disputed. However, by 1784, there were already claims and counterclaims about whether “animal magnetism” was “real,” about whether the phenomena were the product of a psychological rather than a physical process, about whether it had practical medical benefits, about whether it involved a special state of consciousness, and about whether it made possible extraordinary (what would now be called paranormal) phenomena. These themes would continue to be reflected in the subsequent debates about hypnotism. The 1784 commission, sometimes cited as a victory of science over pseudoscience, was merely part of an ongoing debate about the ways in which, and the extent to which, we can be influenced by others. This article provides a general overview of the history of mesmerism and hypnotism, and discusses the wider relevance of suggestion, from Mesmer to the end of the 20th century, based on English-language publications.
The Emergence of Hypnotism

Interest in “animal magnetism,” or “mesmerism,” soon grew throughout Europe, and spread to Britain and the United States. Over the following decades, charismatic itinerant lecturers informed their audiences, which included various medical professionals as well as the wider public, that mesmerism was real, and backed their claims with live demonstrations of trance induction, catalepsy, insensibility to pain, and clairvoyance (Dingwall, 1968b; Kaplan, 1974; Parsinnen, 1977). Many offered medical services. After all, if mesmerism was real, then it promised the possibility of pain-free surgery, and of diagnosis and non-invasive treatment of a variety of ailments. However, whether mesmerism was real, and what, precisely, might be real about it, provoked disputes among medical professionals. In Paris, further commissions by the Academy of Medicine came to different conclusions. In London, demonstrations of mesmerism could be seen at University College Hospital, while accusations of fraud frequently appeared in the pages of The Lancet. The analgesic effects of mesmerism were often confirmed by surgeons and dentists, while claims about cures were often dismissed by senior representatives of the medical profession. Mesmerism also provoked disputes about the boundaries (Gieryn, 1983) of expertise between professionals and lay practitioners, and between experts and the public, as mesmeric lecturers were denounced as quacks, and those who claimed that they had been cured or had felt no pain during surgery were told that they were wrong. Meanwhile, the reality of mesmerism was accepted by clergymen who denounced it as satanic, and by the patients of lay practitioners who felt better, whatever the actual mechanism might be (Crabtree, 1993; Gauld, 1995; Lamont, 2010; Quinn, 2007, 2012; Schmit, 2005; Winter, 1998).

The growing number of public demonstrations of mesmeric phenomena, from catalepsy to clairvoyance, which attracted large audiences and were frequently reported in the press, convinced the majority that there was something to it. One of those who witnessed such
demonstrations was the Scottish surgeon James Braid, who proposed a theory of “neurypnology” (later “hypnotism”) to explain the phenomena (Braid, 1843). According to Braid, the hypnotic sleep was due to a peculiar condition of the nervous system, the result of intense concentration, which could be best induced by fixing attention on a bright object held above the eyes. When the subject was in the deeper stage of sleep, catalepsy and insensibility to pain could be displayed, and through hypnotic methods, certain ailments could be cured. However, as far as he was concerned, no “magnetic” forces were involved, and the more extraordinary phenomena, such as clairvoyance, were not real. The initial reception to Braid’s theory of “hypnotism” was lukewarm, but it would become influential, after the controversy over mesmerism had died down, and in the context of his subsequent discussion of “dominant ideas” (negative fixed beliefs that could lead to involuntary thoughts and actions), and of suggestion as a tool to transform these for the benefit of the patient (Bramwell, 1903; Carpenter, 1853).

The transition from “mesmerism” to “hypnotism,” then, was not immediate, nor was it complete. The decline of mesmerism may have been facilitated by the introduction of chemical anesthesia, but some continued to regard mesmerism as safer and more reliable than chloroform, and its practical utility in surgery was described in convincing detail by James Esdaile (Winter, 1998). Braid’s later writings were in part a response to recent public performances of the so-called “electro-biologists,” who toured North America and Europe in the mid-19th century, demonstrating phenomena that they normally attributed to the induction of a psychological state, by having the subject focus on a metal disc. Prior to the emergence of stage hypnotism in the last quarter of the century, demonstrations by stage conjurors, spiritualist mediums, and thought-readers were often attributed to “mesmeric” or “magnetic” forces that could be used to access, or to influence, the minds of others (Dingwall, 1968b; Gauld, 1995; Lamont, 2013). Even among serious researchers, physical
force theories of hypnotism would continue to be debated throughout the 19th century (Harrington, 1988a).

The curative power of mesmerism also continued to be propounded, and led to the emergence of alternative theories. The American mesmerist P. P. Quimby, who had spent years using mesmeric clairvoyance to provide diagnoses and treatments, became convinced that the cures worked by changing the beliefs of the patient: once they understood that their illness originated in the mind, and that correct thoughts could heal the body, then they could be cured. His patients included Mary Patterson (later Mary Baker Eddy), the founder of Christian Science, and Warren Felt Evans, whose views about mind over matter became the basis of the “mind-cure” movement (Fuller, 1982; Schmit, 2018). These ideas would persist in the New Thought movement, and in the later “self-help” literature. Meanwhile, several European mystics claimed to have experienced revelation while in a magnetic trance, and in 1847 an American prophet, Andrew Jackson Davis, published revelations that led to the emergence of Modern Spiritualism (Carroll, 1997). Spiritualism was sustained by a variety of phenomena that were often similar to those of mesmerism, which diverted the interest of many proponents and critics, and which were treated in much the same way: they were attributed to a natural force, or to charlatanism, or to psychological processes. In the latter case, debunkers of spiritualism drew on newly available naturalistic explanations that had emerged from the debates about mesmerism, attributing spiritualist phenomena to the power of dominant ideas, expectant attention, ideo-motor action, and other natural unconscious processes (Carpenter, 1853; Podmore, 1909). In other words, the phenomena of spiritualism, like the phenomena of mesmerism, provoked responses from psychological scientists that led to new ways of thinking about the unconscious mind.

The “Golden Age” of Hypnotism
With the decline of mesmerism, there was relatively little scientific interest in hypnotism until the final quarter of the century. Meanwhile, there were many individuals who experimented with hypnotism, recounted their efforts, offered their theories, and thus contributed to the rapidly growing, and often ambiguous, literature on what continued to be a controversial subject. Perhaps the most important of these was Ambrose August Liebault, a French country doctor, who put his subjects into a hypnotic sleep by looking into their eyes and telling them to sleep. In this state, which he regarded as the same as normal sleep, he used suggestion to relieve symptoms and to aid the recovery of the patient. At times he postulated a magnetic force, but because of his views on the power of suggestion and his influence on members of the faculty of medicine in Nancy, he would later be regarded as “a kind of father figure to the whole hypnotic movement” (Gauld, 1995, p. 321).

The revival of scientific interest in hypnotism, however, is generally attributed to Charles Richet, the French doctor who became Professor of Physiology at the University of Paris and, later, won a Nobel Prize for medicine. Richet was less concerned with the therapeutic benefits of hypnotism than with the psychological and physiological processes involved in the hypnotic state, which included how the subject’s susceptibility to suggestion led to a form of automatism, and the resulting post-hypnotic amnesia. These, he felt, had implications for the understanding of memory, personality, and psychopathology, and his publications on hypnotism, from 1875 onwards, attracted serious scientific interest (Ellenberger, 1970; Gauld, 1995). The most significant interested party was Jean-Martin Charcot, head of the neurological clinic at Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, who had recently taken an interest in the claims surrounding metallotherapy (Harrington, 1988a), and who began to investigate hypnotism in 1878.

Charcot’s interest in hypnotism emerged from his studies of hysteria, which he regarded as the result of emotional trauma in individuals with an inherited predisposition. Hypnosis
seemed to produce symptoms similar to those of his hysterical patients, appearing in distinct phases of catalepsy, lethargy, and somnambulism. Charcot concluded that hypnosis, like hysteria, was a kind of neurosis, an abnormal state rooted in a similar inherited pathological disposition. Some of Charcot’s students, such as Alfred Binet and Charles Féré, investigated the physiological roots of hypnotism, and claimed that symptoms could be induced with the use of magnets and different kinds of metal. According to such findings, hypnosis was not mere suggestion, but depended on a physical process. The connection to earlier theories of animal magnetism was obvious, and one example of how physicalist explanations persisted long after Braid (Alvarado, 2009; Hajek, 2015b; Harrington, 1988a, 1988b; Plas, 1998).

Meanwhile, in Nancy, a parallel line of enquiry was providing quite different conclusions. Following Liebault, Hippolyte Bernheim was stressing the role of suggestion in hypnotism, claiming that hypnotic sleep was normal and that suggestibility was common. In doing so, he denied the link between hypnosis and hysteria, and rejected the pathological and physiological explanations of Charcot and his colleagues. The famous dispute between Nancy and Salpêtrière concerned both the key claims about the nature of hypnosis and the validity of specific findings, such as those of Binet and Féré. According to the standard story, within a few years it was widely thought that the Nancy school had won the debate, and that hypnosis was normal and the product of suggestion. It was, of course, more complicated than that, given the diversity of phenomena discussed, and the fact that such disputes were often tied to claims about scientific and medical authority. The dispute between the two French schools was part of a wider debate about who was qualified to practice, and to pronounce upon such matters, and was echoed in the United States, Germany, Britain, and other European countries (Brancaccio, 2017; Gauld, 1995; Graus, 2014; Guarnieri, 1988; Gyimesi, 2018; Hajek, 2017; Leighton, 2001; Maehle, 2014; Wolfram, 2012).
In terms of psychological theory, however, even if hypnosis was the product of suggestion, there remained the question of whether it involved a special hypnotic state, and the implications of such a state for understanding memory and personality. The idea of an alternative consciousness had been discussed for over a century in terms of somnambulism or “double consciousness” and, in the last quarter of the century, double (and multiple) “personalities” were linked to specific memories (Crabtree, 1993; Hacking, 1995). The implications for normal personality were explored most famously by Pierre Janet, who proposed that certain behaviors, such as “automatic” writing and speaking, were “subconscious,” the product of a “dissociated” personality, and that certain psychological disorders could be understood in terms of the dissociation of traumatic experience from conscious awareness. It was a theory that would influence Freud (Ellenberger, 1970), and though he abandoned the use of hypnosis and employed the term “psychoanalysis” to distinguish what he did from a psychotherapeutic movement that was associated with hypnosis and suggestion (Shamdasani, 2005), there were significant continuities between hypnosis and psychoanalysis in terms of theory, practice, and context (Chertok & de Saussere, 1979; Ellenberger, 1970; Mayer, 2013). Meanwhile, others discussed the existence of an alternate self in a variety of ways: Boris Sidis spoke of the “subwaking” self as brutal and highly suggestible; Max Dessoir of “underconsciousness”; Morton Prince of “co-consciousness”; Frederic Myers of the “subliminal” self as the seat of psychic abilities; and Alfred Binet pointed out that artificial personalities could be created by suggestion (Crabtree, 1993, 2003).

More generally, disagreements about hypnosis were based on disputed boundaries between conscious and non-conscious processes, and between the normal, the abnormal, and the paranormal. Nobody doubted the power of “suggestion,” but the meaning of the term, and the limits of its influence, were far from clear. The idea that hypnosis was “real” depended on
excluding alternative options, such as (conscious) simulation by the subject and “unconscious suggestion” by the experimenter. In other words, even if the responses of subjects were genuine (i.e., not conscious simulation), it was thought that they might be responses to subtle cues unintentionally provided by the experimenter (Hajek, 2015a). In addition to possible unconscious influence, there was the possibility that hypnotized subjects might have hyper-sensory abilities, and from there it was not such a leap to wonder if they might respond to “mental suggestion,” or even to hypnotism at a distance. Several leading hypnotism researchers in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States conducted psychical research, and made explicit claims about psychic and supernatural abilities, while sceptics continued to draw the line by appealing to unconscious influence, dissociation, and hyper-sensory (but not “psychic”) abilities as scientific explanations for seemingly psychic or supernatural phenomena (Brower, 2010; Coon, 1992; Evrard & Pratte, 2017 Lamont, 2013; Oppenheim, 1988; Plas, 2012; Sommer, 2012; Williams, 1985; Wolfram, 2009). Such boundaries, even when constructed in the discourse of experts, were often rather fuzzy.

Meanwhile, the public encountered evidence of the power of hypnosis and suggestion in a variety of forms. Itinerant stage performers continued to demonstrate extraordinary phenomena, often combined with lectures about the process, sometimes accompanied by conjuring tricks and questionable claims. In doing so, they convinced the public of the power of hypnotism to control individuals and to elicit remarkable abilities, and continued to provoke both the curiosity and the hostility of scientists and medics (Brancaccio, 2017; Gauld, 1995; Graus, 2017). Hypnotists appeared as characters in novels, plays, and early films, most famously the character of Svengali (Andriopoulous, 2008; Pick, 2000; van Schlun, 2007). European and American newspapers published articles about the ability of Indian “fakirs” to induce mass hallucinations (Lamont & Bates, 2007). The idea that hypnotism could be used in crime, to exploit vulnerable victims or to induce criminal
behavior, was widely discussed in scientific, legal, and popular circles, and criminal trials involving hypnotism attracted international press interest. In the process, ideas about hypnosis and suggestion were disseminated throughout Europe and further afield, crossing not only geographical boundaries but also disputed professional boundaries between medics, academics, and practitioners, and shaping the views of legislators, lawyers, and a lay public that included potential jurors, patients, and clients (Harris, 1985; Hughes, 2015; Lafferton, 2007; Laurence & Perry, 1988; Maehle, 2017; Plas, 1998; Wils, 2017; Wolffram, 2017).

More general fears about the suggestibility of the public were famously expressed by Gustav Le Bon, who compared the individual in a crowd to a hypnotized subject, under the control of unconscious and irrational forces. Meanwhile, differences in hypnotizability and suggestibility often reflected contemporary assumptions about gender, class, and race, and were linked to wider concerns about degeneration. In a variety of contexts, suggestibility implied vulnerability, a lack of free will, and, by extension, a lack of accountability, and suggestion became a powerful metaphor for all kinds of interpersonal influence (Andrick, 2012; Apfelbaum & McGuire, 1986; Chettiar, 2012; Faber, 1996; Nye, 1975; Pick, 2000). At the same time, a more positive image was presented by the New Thought movement, which embraced the concept of a universal force—what was called, in Prentice Mulford’s Thoughts are Things (1889), the “law of attraction”—through which, by having positive thoughts, one could get whatever one wanted, from individual health to personal wealth, and that would feed a booming self-help industry throughout the following century.

By then a science of psychology had emerged, which had drawn on quite different investigative practices, one of which was the use of hypnotism as a methodological tool in France (Carroy & Plas, 1996; Danziger, 1990). However, hypnotism also suggested problems in interpreting the responses of experimental subjects, and in controlling the influence of the experimenter, which raised fundamental questions about the objectivity of psychological
experiments (Leblanc, 2004). Hypnosis and suggestion might be tools that could be used to access hidden thoughts, but they were also a means of modifying thoughts and behavior. The phenomena associated with hypnotism could easily be interpreted as the product of psychological reality or else of psychological methodology, and as evidence both for and against the reality of psychic phenomena. Scientists and the public continued to assume that there was something to it, and as we shall see, attempts were made to draw boundaries between the physical, the psychological, and the social, as well as between scientists and the public (who were their experimental subjects).

**Hypnotism and Suggestion, c. 1900–1950**

By the turn of the century, scientific interest in hypnotism had declined. Bernheim was increasingly clear that there was no special hypnotic state, though many disagreed, and clinical interest remained high. Psychotherapists, who were mostly neurologists, had established clinics in Amsterdam and Zurich, and others were being opened throughout Central Europe. In 1900, the International Congress of Hypnotism in Paris included participants from Central and South America, Iceland, Egypt, and Persia (Gauld, 1995). In Japan, where translations of books by Mesmer and Albert Moll had been available since the 1880s, books by indigenous authors began to appear (Takasuna, 2012; Wu, 2018a, 2018b). In Boston, Morton Prince continued to use hypnosis to study dissociation, and founded the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* in 1906 (later, the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*), which became a key venue for published research on hypnosis.

Experimental psychologists, however, had become more interested in “suggestion” and “suggestibility” (Binet, 1900; Sidis, 1898). The concept of “suggestion” was defined in countless ways, along with a variety of subcategories. There was “conscious” and
“unconscious” (and some would add “incompletely conscious”) suggestion (Scott, 1916), “passive” rather than “active” suggestion, “auto-” rather than “hetero-suggestion,” and “contrary suggestion” rather than “slavish imitation” (when “suggestion is uncritically received”) (Scott, 1912). There was also “social suggestion,” which, it was claimed, had been used in the Boxer Rebellion to convince the rebels of their invulnerability (Scott, 1913). Suggestion was treated as a cognitive phenomenon, or as an affective phenomenon, or as both, and sometimes “suggestion” was defined “so broadly that it includes practically all conscious and ‘unconscious’ cognitive and affective processes” (Scott, 1912, p. 270). It was also a fundamental concept in early social psychology: Edward Ross’s Social Psychology viewed all kinds of social behavior in terms of suggestion and imitation, and William McDougall’s Introduction to Social Psychology stressed the importance of suggestion and suggestibility in social life (McDougall, 1908; Ross, 1908).

More significant, perhaps, was the shift of focus from suggestion to suggestibility, the former being an interactional process, the latter being an individual trait. By comparing differences between individuals, suggestibility could be measured, and while everyone was susceptible to suggestion, some were more suggestible than others. Differences in the suggestibility of certain groups and individuals became a topic of interest that had potential practical application. Experiments were conducted that used suggestion to create sensory illusions (such as illusions of perfume, or of heat and cold), or to influence the copying of handwriting or the recall of images, which demonstrated the ubiquity of suggestibility and imitation among normal school students, and discussed the pedagogical implications (Scott, 1911; Small, 1896). Experimental evidence, based on tests of suggestibility such as Binet’s (1900) Progressive Lines and Progressive Weights tests, or hand rigidity, supported the view that suggestibility was a specific trait (Aveling & Hargreaves, 1921; Otis, 1923), that it was not (Brown, 1916; Estabrooks, 1929), and that there may be more than one type (Prideaux,
In studies of individual differences, although one reviewer noted that, if recent findings were verified, then “we shall be compelled to cast aside the time-honored tradition that women are more suggestible than men” (Scott, 1912, p. 269), the tradition managed to survive (Eysenck, 1947).

These were, in a wider sense, studies of unconscious interpersonal influence and, like Triplett’s famous experiments, would later be cited as early examples of experimental social psychology, though this was hardly the intention at the time (Danziger, 2000). Experiments on subliminal perception had been conducted by Charles Pierce and Joseph Jastrow (1884) and by Boris Sidis (1898), and the possibility of subliminal influence continued to be discussed in different areas of psychology. In the emerging area of comparative psychology, the seemingly wonderful mental abilities of animals such as Clever Hans were quickly attributed to unconscious communication via subtle and involuntary cues (Di Sio & Marazia, 2014). In psychical research, the subliminal reception of information had long been a skeptical explanation for demonstrations of mind-reading, and continued to be cited by skeptics: in 1913, for example, Hugo Munsterburg publicly attributed a case of apparent x-ray vision to an “abnormal power to receive the signs without their coming at once to consciousness” (Lamont, 2013, p. 192). In psychiatry, Otto Pätzl conducted experiments in 1917 to show that images that were not consciously perceived could nevertheless be retrieved in dreams (Pätzl, 1917/1960).

A new thread of scientific work on hypnosis began in the 1920s. In 1923, Clark Hull and his associates at Wisconsin began a long series of experiments. In line with what was now the dominant behaviorist approach of American psychology, Hull rejected earlier clinical work in favor of a strictly experimental methodology, which was based on hypothesis-testing and quantitative methods, and used normal subjects. After a decade of experiments, Hypnosis and Suggestibility was published in 1933. According to Hull, the hypnotic state was not related to
sleep and was nothing more than heightened suggestibility, which was at least partially a habit. He also distinguished between direct and indirect forms of suggestion. Meanwhile, at Harvard University, P. C. Young was conducting experimental work on hypnosis, and others on the relationship of hypnosis to personality (Barry, McKinnon, & Murray, 1931; Young, 1925). In the 1940s, experimental and statistical methods were used to distinguish between primary (direct) and secondary (indirect) suggestibility, with only the former being related to hypnosis (Eysenck, 1947).

Meanwhile, the clinical application of hypnosis continued along a parallel, but quite different, track. On the fringes, of course, mental healing continued to be used in the growing religion of Christian Science, the Emmanuel movement, and a variety of smaller spiritually oriented healing groups. During the World War I, however, eminent psychologists such as W. H. R. Rivers and William McDougall, both of whom were hostile to behaviorism, used hypnosis to deal with psychological trauma. From the 1920s, Milton Erickson, in stark contrast with Hull’s attempts to standardize and quantify, employed a wide variety of induction techniques depending on the subject and, while Hull had minimized the role of the hypnotic trance and regarded hypnosis as suggestibility, Erickson regarded the trance state as the essence of hypnosis. During World War II, hypnosis was widely used by psychiatrists and psychotherapists, and its successful therapeutic application contributed to a revival of interest in the post-war years (Pintar & Lynn, 2008).

Throughout the early 20th century, however, psychologists recognized the practical relevance of suggestion beyond the laboratory and the clinic (Benjamin, 2007). That suggestion affected memory was the basis of a new psychology of testimony in France and Germany, where the practical implications for eyewitness testimony in court were investigated; and Hugo Munsterberg, though he tried to make a similar argument in the United States but failed to convince, went on to stress the importance of suggestion in his
application of psychology to business (Danziger, 2008; Munsterberg, 1913; Wolffram, 2018). By then, Walter Dill Scott had already argued that suggestion was more effective than reasoned argument in business and, particularly, in advertising (Kuna, 1976), Harlow Gale had conducted empirical work on brand associations and attention-getting aspects of advertisements (Eighmey & Sar, 2007), and further experiments on the efficacy of advertisements soon appeared, which were promptly disseminated to the world of business, along with several “laws of suggestion” that were regarded as important in the commercial world (Hollingworth, 1913). The same techniques that worked in advertising were used successfully for the purposes of propaganda during World War I and, during the interwar period, some psychologists became increasingly concerned about the vulnerability of the public to the use of propaganda as a form of social control, whether by capitalists, communists, or Nazis (Biddle, 1932; Doob, 1935). World War II naturally dampened criticisms of propaganda in general, and more partisan views prevailed. In 1943, for example, the American psychologist, George Estabrooks, compared Hitler to a “stage hypnotist one step removed,” while arguing that hypnosis should be used in warfare to create “super spies” (Estabrooks, 1943).

Meanwhile, claims about the power of suggestion crossed the blurry lines between psychology, popular psychology, and self-help. What one psychoanalyst (Baudouin, 1923) described as the “New Nancy School” was espoused by Emile Coué, a former assistant of Bernheim, who rejected hypnosis in favor of conscious autosuggestion, stressing the reality of thoughts, the power of the imagination over the will, and the practical efficacy of positive affirmations in the treatment of various ailments and in daily life. More extravagant claims were made in the increasingly popular self-help literature, as millions of new readers encountered the old idea of New Thought: that health, wealth, and happiness were the result of thinking in the correct way. Bestselling self-help books extolled the power of thoughts to
tap into the law of the universe to bring about individual good fortune, providing one had faith in the power of positive thinking to cure, transform, and enrich (Allen, 1903; Hill, 1937; Peale, 1952). Even in the realm of entertainment, the boundary between what was real and what was not was difficult to discern, as stage performers frequently crossed the line between illusion and reality (Lamont, 2013). Erik Jan Hanussen, who performed stage hypnosis in Berlin in the 1920s, conducted séances for senior Nazi officials and became a consultant to Hitler, advising him on how to influence a crowd (Gordon, 2001). When, in 1943, Estabrooks compared Hitler to a “stage hypnotist one step removed,” then, he may have been more accurate than he realized.

By the middle of the century, the practical relevance of hypnosis and suggestion, however they might be defined and whatever mechanism might be involved, was increasingly clear. In the second half of the century, and particularly in the United States, psychologists took a more serious interest in the subject, conducting experiments and offering different theories relating not only to hypnosis and suggestion, but also to their wider implications.

**Hypnotism and Suggestion, c. 1950–2000**

In the 1950s, there was a revival of hypnosis research. A social psychological theory of hypnotic behavior emerged mid-century, which rejected both automatism and dissociation. According to R. W. White, the hypnotized subject was not a passive organism that responded to stimuli, but rather was an active participant in “a meaningful, goal-directed striving to act like a hypnotized person”; and, though the subject was in an “altered state,” it was one that was not so different from the normal state, the “chief peculiarity of which was in its effect on goal-directed striving” (White, 1941). Along similar lines, though placing greater stress on the subject’s motivation, perception, and aptitude, Theodore Sarbin proposed that hypnotic
behavior be understood as an example of a more general form of behavior, role-taking, in which the subject took the role of an actor, while the hypnotist played the role of director (Sarbin, 1950). The subsequent “role theory” of Sarbin and Coe (1972), which pointed out that role-playing did not necessarily imply conscious deception, would continue to stress the interactional nature of hypnotic phenomena, and the role of various factors such as expectation and imagination.

By then, the view that hypnosis could be explained in terms of a special, altered state had been challenged even more directly by Theodore Barber, who operationalized hypnosis in terms of responses to suggestion, and explained these in terms of normal psychological factors such as motivations, expectations, and attitudes (Barber, 1969). This general line of argument, that hypnotic behavior was essentially no different from non-hypnotic behavior, was tied to one side of a growing “state/non-state debate.” The key proponent of the state theory, Ernest Hilgard, was based in Stanford, and had created the Stanford Scales of hypnotic susceptibility. Hilgard proposed a “neodissociation theory” of hypnosis, in which the “executive ego,” which controls the various cognitive systems in the mind, is divided into two parts that are unaware of each other. In support of this theory, Hilgard claimed to have found what he called a “hidden observer,” a part of the mind that remains aware of what is going on, but of which the hypnotized subject is unaware (Hilgard, 1973).

As the “state/non-state debate” became the central theme of the wider question about the “reality” of hypnosis, claims and counterclaims persisted about what, precisely, the experimental evidence demonstrated. For example, Barber’s studies appeared to show that “task-motivated” subjects who were not hypnotized displayed behavior that was similar to that of hypnotized subjects. However, according to critics, the use of randomly selected subjects would dilute the effect of good hypnotic subjects, and the “task-motivation” effectively forced subjects to do what they were told (Sheehan & Dolby, 1974). Similarly,
Hilgard’s “hidden observer” appeared to provide empirical support for his neodissociation theory, but others claimed that it could be explained in terms of conventional social psychological processes during the experiment (Spanos & Hewitt, 1980). The debate about the existence of a hypnotic state, which depended on what one meant by “state,” on whether it was considered causal, and on how unique it was thought to be, produced a wide variety of positions, within which a growing number of experts increasingly agreed that, in some sense, one might speak of an altered state, though not necessarily a special one. At the same time, there was an ongoing disagreement over how to explain individual differences in hypnotic responsiveness, specifically in terms of whether or not this was a stable individual trait.

Imaginative involvement, absorption (Barber, Spanos, & Chaves, 1974), and, later, fantasy-proneness (Wilson & Barber, 1983), emerged as possible variables that might explain individual differences in responses, though most researchers continued to regard contextual factors as relevant (Pintar & Lynn, 2008).

The wider implications of the role of suggestion in psychological experiments, which had been implied decades earlier, became an explicit topic in the 1960s. Martin Orne, a former student of R. W. White, extended the social psychological view of hypnosis to the general experimental context, in which the “demand characteristics” of the situation influenced the behavior of the subject (Orne, 1962). The extent to which subjects could be subtly influenced by the experimenter was studied directly in terms of a variety of “experimenter effects” (Rosenthal, 1966). That experimental subjects were susceptible to suggestion had been discussed in early work on formation of group norms (Sherif, 1935), and the malleability of subjects was implicit in subsequent studies of attitude change, conformity, compliance, and obedience, which offered alternative explanations for why people, consciously or unconsciously, follow the suggestions or instructions of others (Prislin & Crano, 2012). However, there remained widespread suspicions concerning the interaction
between experimenter and subject, the degree of influence of one on the other, the extent to which one could trust the other, and the implications of this for experimental control and objectivity (Morawski, 2015).

In the last quarter of the century, the most significant development in hypnosis research was the growth of theoretical, clinical, and experimental work on legal aspects of hypnosis (Fromm & Nash, 1992). By the 1970s, the view that hypnosis could be used to recover hidden memories accurately, as if replaying a recording of the past, had led to the emergence of forensic hypnosis (Winter, 2013). In the context of eyewitness testimony, of course, the status of a “recovered memory” was of the utmost importance. The response of some psychologists, such as Martin Orne and Elizabeth Loftus, was to challenge not only the validity of recovered memories but also the general theory of memory on which it was based. Studies were conducted, and their conclusions deliberately and widely disseminated, which stressed the vulnerability of retrieved memories, and of memory in general, to suggestion (Loftus & Ketcham, 1994). Hypnotists were accused of creating not only false memories but also multiple personalities (Ofshe & Watters, 1994). The use of hypnosis in the treatment of Multiple Personality Disorder accompanied an enormous rise both in the detection of its presence and in the number of personalities detected, raising old questions about whether hypnosis was creating, rather than revealing, past and present states of mind (Hacking, 1995).

Beyond the laboratory, clinic, and courtroom, such issues were discussed in newspapers, and represented in fiction, television, and cinema. Members of the public, who constituted the pool of experimental subjects, patients, and jurors, were provided with evidence that personal memories and subjective accounts of oneself could not be trusted. They were also provided with stories, which covered the continuum from fact to fiction, of the power of others to influence their minds. Reports of brainwashing and mind control being used by governments during the Cold War, public perceptions of Pavlovian conditioning, propaganda that
exaggerated the power of enemy propaganda, claims about the ability of subliminal advertising to influence consumers without their knowledge, or of hidden satanic messages in music, reached a wider audience via popular books, novels, newspapers, television programs, and films (Derksen, 2017; Kennaway, 2012; Taylor, 2004). Meanwhile, stage hypnotists continued to provide live demonstrations and, later, televised demonstrations of how easily ordinary people could be manipulated, and self-help books and seminars continued to offer advice on how to manipulate others, and on how to improve oneself, based on a variety of partial descendants of hypnotism, suggestion, and positive thinking (McGee, 2005).

At the turn of the 21st century, hypnosis was still being used with success in the treatment of some medical and psychological conditions, its most practical utility being in the relief of pain, while ongoing theoretical disagreements, concerning the hypnotic state and hypnotizability as a trait, were disputed in modified forms that sought, in varying degrees, to balance social, cognitive, and neurological explanations, individual and contextual factors, and experimental and clinical concerns (Fromm & Nash, 1992; Pintar & Lynn, 2008). Indeed, beyond the central questions that continue to concern hypnosis researchers, the importance of mesmerism, hypnotism, and suggestion is that they have been arenas in which the limits of influence in human interaction have been explored, constructed, and disputed. This has had consequences for experimental research in psychology, because psychological experiments are a form of human interaction. One recent form of unconscious influence, social priming, which seemed to demonstrate the automaticity of social behavior, raising larger questions about the limits of human self-control, went on to become a focus of the “replication crisis” in psychology, raising quite different questions about the reliability and validity of experimental findings, and about the limits of experimental control (Derksen, 2017). Furthermore, such concerns had been triggered by an article on anomalous cognition and affect (Bem, 2011), which provoked the initial debate about methodology, analysis, and
publication within psychology. This was only the most recent example of how seemingly extraordinary phenomena, which had been associated with mesmerism, rejected by Braid, and continued via spiritualism to psychical research and, later, to experimental parapsychology, raised questions about the limits of psychological methods. In the process, they provoked new approaches, from randomization in experimental design (Hacking, 1988) to a prototype of registered reports (Wiseman, Watt, & Kornbrot, 2019). Indeed, since 1784, when experimental subjects were first blindfolded (Kaptchuk, 1998), the investigation of mesmerism and its descendants has had a significant influence on how psychologists interact with their subjects, how they understand human interaction more generally, and how ordinary people understand themselves.

References


Binet, A. (1900). *La suggestibilité*. Paris: Schleicher. [This classic text has not been translated into English.]


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1 There are several excellent scholarly books available in English on the history of hypnotism, some of which have focused on the period from Mesmer to the end of the 19th century (Chertok & de Saussere, 1979; Crabtree, 1993; Ellenberger, 1970; Gauld, 1995; Pick, 2000), and others that have focused on more specific topics, such as the emergence of mesmerism in France (Darnton, 1968; Pattie, 1994), the significance of mesmerism and hypnotism in Britain in the 19th century (Winter, 1998; Hughes, 2015), and the more remarkable phenomena of mesmerism and hypnotism that were reported throughout Europe, the United States, and Latin America during the 19th century (Dingwall, 1967a, 1967b, 1968a, 1968b). References in languages other than English, most commonly French and German, can be found in the bibliographies of these texts, and in Crabtree
There is also an excellent overview of the history of hypnosis research by experts in that field (Pintar & Lynn, 2008).