CHAPTER 7

> The belief that most people are not responsive to hypnosis by virtue of some biological or characterological deficit is widely accepted by both the public and health care professionals . . . The belief that only a minority of the population is "susceptible" to hypnosis is in part a refinement of a much older belief that only persons of inferior intellect or of "weak personality" [usually women] could be hypnotized.
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> —J. Barber, 1982, p. 43

Interestingly enough, even a brief look at the history of that idea will reveal that it can be traced all the way back to Mesmer's day and the dawn of the authoritarian approach. As was seen in chapter 1, this approach was based on the belief that magnetized subjects were somehow overpowered by a force either possessed by, or channeled through, the person of the mesmerist; and for those who subscribed to that misguided conception, the "logical" conclusion was that people with an inferior intellect or weak will (especially the "weaker sex") would be the most "susceptible".

For example, according to Voltelen (in Veirac, 1791), "Animal Magnetism has the most pronounced effect on women, or on effeminate men with weak and tender constitutions" (p. 67).

Fokke Simonsz (1814) similarly claimed that "the Magnetic Sleep . . . is usually induced in those with a sickly constitution, nervous ills, hysterical convulsions, women—especially spinsters—and exceedingly nervous men" (p. 24).

The record suggests that this highly unflattering interpretation of "susceptibility" had no shortage of advocates.

By the mid-1800s, moreover, nothing much had changed, as is evident in the following anecdote from Esdaile (1846/1902):

> In choosing a proper subject to experiment upon, I should probably have selected some highly sensitive female of a nervous temperament, and excitable imagination, who desired to submit to the supposed influence . . . On the contrary, the very worst specimen of humanity, theoretically considered, was the person destined to be my first mesmeric victim; he being none other than a Hindoo felon of the hangman cast, condemned to labour on the roads, in irons . . . I should as soon have thought of commencing operations on the first dog or pig I met on the road, as of selecting this man for his good mesmeric "material". (p. 39)

As has been seen, the continuing predominance of the authoritarian approach was going to *ensure* that comparable views would still be in force at the end of the century.

Consider, if you will, Björnström's (1887) description of the Nancy School's theory that "this common human susceptibility . . . (is) most prominent in weak, sensitive, powerless, dependent natures, and generally most in women, children, and old men" (p. 46).

Or what about Charcot's belief that the dozen or so "hysterical" female patients at the Salpêtrière were ideal subjects.

It will be recalled how Charcot's illustrious reputation saw to it that his views on the matter would be highly influential, and this was all too evident in Tuckey's (1889/1921) account of how "the physician in charge of a large workhouse infirmary once asked me to try hypnotism in his wards and he picked out for me some suitable patients, as he thought. They were three broken-down hysterical women of low mental power, whose teeth chattered with fear when I looked at them" (p. 181).

These were not the views of some wayward lunatic fringe, but of the majority of hypnosis investigators at that point in time.

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While some investigators were seemingly content to limit the phenomenon to "weak-minded" women or "nervous" men, others would boldly claim that residents of entire *countries* were (by nature of some *inferior* quality) highly susceptible to hypnotism and suggestion.

According to Kingsbury (1891/1894), for instance,

> It was for a long time supposed that only certain races could be hypnotized, and some writers in England flattered themselves by saying that whilst Esdaile's almost universal success in India on the natives was not surprising, and the general susceptibility of the French was only to be expected, it would be found that John Bull was much too stolid to be affected. (p. 63)

By the same token, Cocke (1894) had (not a little smugly) reported how "the American people certainly seem less susceptible to hypnotism, and as a rule are more skeptical about it, than are their brethren across the water" (p. 19).

Probably the most complete categorization along these lines was provided by Sextus (1893/1895), who offered his readers the following words of wisdom:

> Regarding the susceptibility of hypnotic influence, it is very interesting to note the great differences in the percentage of nationalities. The first on the list to be mentioned are the French, with about fifty per cent; next come the English and the Scandinavians with about forty per cent; Germans are about twenty-five per cent; while of the Dutch there are only fifteen per cent. A very susceptible nation, although far up north, are the inhabitants of the Hundred Islands. I have found that about forty per cent of the Finlanders can be influenced . . . The Latin races are more easily influenced than the Teutonic races. The South Americans are more susceptible than the North Americans. In the Eastern countries, especially in the East Indies, the susceptibility is larger than in any other country on the earth; in fact, the people there are all susceptible to hypnotic influence. (p. 19)

That's *his* theory at least.

Though the author neglected to provide equally illuminating statistics on the former communist superpower, Moll (1889/1909) helped fill this gap by reporting that "recently it has been pointed out in many quarters that Russians are more easily hypnotized than any other people" (p. 51).
As for the citizens of the world's most populous country, Tuckey (1889/1921) could only manage this inscrutably ambiguous statement:

> Cory says ["Hypnotism and Mesmerism", Boston, 1888] that he has never

> succeeded in hypnotizing a Chinese, though he has experimented on several. The Orientals I have treated have mostly been good subjects. (pp. 168-169)

Nor should the efforts of Meacham (1898) be forgotten—if only for his having developed the highly . . . original . . . hypothesis that correlated susceptibility with degree of elevation above *sea* level.

In his own immortal words, "The elevations of South Germany afford more suggestible people than the sandy levels of the North . . . I noted the fact of dwellers among hills and mountains, and those whose ancestors thence originated, proving more susceptible to suggestion, long before I recognized it as a principle. I sought engagements for public exhibitions in cities among the hills rather than on the prairie" (pp. 73-74).

Rumor has it that the author gave his finest exhibition in a Sherpa village on the slopes of Mt. Everest.

Meacham, apparently not content with just *one* trailblazing theory, had also postulated a theory of susceptibility based upon certain aspects of a person's physiognomy, to wit, thinness of skin and softness of hair: "In considering susceptibility to suggestion", he explained, "the general idea is that blondes are more susceptible than brunettes . . . (but) thinness of skin and fineness and softness of hair are favorable indications, and not the colour of the pigment cells. The negro, though woolly, however, may have as soft and as satiny a skin as the fairest Swede" (ibid, p. 73).
This resourceful author had thoughtfully noted the characteristic physiognomy of the most *un*suitable type of subject as well: "Men with low retreating foreheads, bullet-shaped heads, widest in the region of the ears, little deep-set shifting eyes, can rarely if ever be hypnotized. A brutal man is never a good subject" (ibid, p. 57).
So much for the future of hypnosis in professional wrestling or the NFL.

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Now, the curious reader might ask, if those with "bullet-shaped" heads made the *worst* subjects, just what type of cranial characteristic would signify *good* ones?
Fortunately for them, the following clues are available. First of all, there was "Professor" J. W. Cadwell's (*Full and Comprehensive Instructions on How to Mesmerize*, 1882) observation that "almost invariably, I find that people with very full temples are generally easy subjects, while those with very hollow temples are very hard to control" (in Edmonston 1986, p. 121).

Riko (1891/1928), on the other hand, recorded the following view for posterity: "Dr. Rigg advises that you choose (subjects) with narrow, mildly jutting chins, short upper lips, and very widely-set eyes" (p. 57).
Finally, consider "Professor" Seymour's (1892) invaluable advice on the matter:

> QUESTION—have you any method of determining this difference in individuals without having to try the various experiments? Answer—Yes! We can determine these differences by a knowledge and observance of Phrenological development; persons who are the most easily fascinated are those in whom the organ of Continuity—or Concentration, is largely developed; hence there is a fullness in the back part of the head, rendering it in shape somewhat like the end of a Cocoa-Nut. (p. 130)

Next question?
Well, there are those who might, not unreasonably, wonder if such a correlation between susceptibility and *head* shape didn't hint at some kind of correlation between susceptibility and *body* shape; and lo and behold, there have been (at least) two independent proponents of what could be termed the trait of tubbiness or, perhaps more charitably, the corpulence factor.
It seems that more than a century ago, Cahagnet (1883) had quaintly proposed that "slender, ill-tempered, dark-complexioned persons are highly 'électrique' . . . (but) exceedingly obese, full-blooded persons are even more magnetizable" (p. 25).
Almost a hundred years later, a curiously similar notion was described by Edmonston (1977) as follows: "The more Fat [Endomorphic] a male physique has, the more likely is that individual to have a high capacity for hypnosis; the same is true of the Linear [Ectomorphic] male physique" (p. 113).
As the author (ibid) went on to elaborate,

> From our data, it is suggested that individuals whose major development occurs either at nine months and therefore develop Fat physiques, or in the ninth to twelfth years and therefore develop Linear physiques, will be those individuals with the highest capacity for hypnosis, while those whose peak development is in the adolescent years and therefore project a more Muscular body shape will be the least responsive to hypnosis. (p. 115)

Arnold Schwarzenegger, eat your heart out!

* * *

So to hear these authorities tell it, the "ideal" hypnotic subject would presumably have to be a fat, thin-skinned, soft-haired, hysterical, weak-minded, sickly East Indian (or Russian) woman, child, or old man—who was preferably living at high altitude and had a coconut-shaped head.

Fair enough. But that still failed to enlighten us about the specific *personality* characteristics of the ideal subject. For that, however, we can trustingly turn to other sources.

For starters, Schilder and Kauders (1927) had, in the best Freudian tradition, instructed that "persons strongly disposed to love, persons with the tendency to fixate love-objects powerfully, customarily are easily inducted into profound hypnosis" (p. 39).

This seems to indicate that moody, love-sick teenagers are by far the most "susceptible".

Shaftsbury (1924/1933), on the other hand, chose to focus more on the characteristics of *refractory* subjects. Characteristics, it should be added, that he obviously admired, seeing as how he wrote, "The few persons who never came under the spell [*sic*] . . . seem cold in their nature, and lacking in sympathy for the misfortunes of others; while possessing an attractive personal power. They are recognized as strong in all their faculties and as leaders of mankind" (p. 73).

Shaftsbury, by the way, also mentioned the fact that "one excellent hypnotist said very frankly that the nearer a person came to insanity the better subject . . . was produced" (ibid, p. 42).

I'm told the author in question can be reached for further comment (night or day) at his "practice" in Bellevue.

A somewhat more flattering hypothesis was offered by Hull (1933), who chose the trait of "amiability" as the distinguishing feature in good subjects. But Ulett and Peterson (1965) made short work of that, well, amiable theory by scornfully writing, "Hull stated that, of all personality attributes, only the trait of amiability showed good positive correlation with hypnotizability—not surprising, since we like those who fall in with our plans and regard them as amiable!" (p. 28).

Then again, a hauntingly similar hypothesis would be proposed anew almost a half century later, this time by Wagstaff (1981). Seeing as how his choice of characteristic was practically the mirror image of amiability, it could perhaps most accurately be referred to as the trait of touchiness.

As he explained, "Some insusceptible persons appear to show a very slight tendency to be unsociable, unstable, suspicious individuals who possibly do not like people investigating their personality characteristics" (p. 138).

Perhaps that's just as well.

Curiously enough, yet another modern investigator (Orne 1977) claimed to have discovered a link between an unpleasant personality characteristic (in this case, laggardness) and susceptibility. Ladies and gentlemen, the trait of tardiness theory: "Again, using punctuality as the measure of motivation", wrote Orne, "one finds that highly hypnotizable individuals are more likely to arrive late or even miss appointments than those subjects who have more difficulty in entering hypnosis" (p. 16).

The trait of tubbiness, the trait of touchiness, the trait of tardiness—there was clearly no *limit* to the ingenuity of some investigators!

As time went on, the latest generation of susceptibility researchers would, with varying degrees of frustration, hungrily embrace a daunting array of psychodiagnostic tests cunningly designed to ferret out even the most subtle of correlations.
However, as Kebrdle and Roeder (1986) reported,

> Investigators utilized the following measures: Rosenzweig Picture Frustration Test . . . the Taylor Anxiety Scale, Bills-Vance-McLean Index of Adjustment and Values, the Thematic Apperception Test . . . Rorschach, Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, Edwards Personal Preference Schedule, Leary Interpersonal Check List, California Psychological Inventory, Maudsly Personality Inventory . . . (and) all failed to support a relationship between personality factors and susceptibility. (p. 26)

The search, nevertheless, would go on.
And *on*.

[see ***NOTE 23*** on p. 397]

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Now, if only it *could* have been conclusively demonstrated that, for instance, all people with green eyes or curly hair (biological trait) were highly hypnotizable, or maybe shown that susceptibility correlated positively and significantly with a subject's degree of bashfulness or greed (characterological trait), these efforts might yet have been vindicated. But, all things being equal, investigators these days are leery of becoming too

specific about any one characteristic, as well they should be, for the only really consistently *verifiable* trait has turned out to be none other than the aggravation level of the researchers themselves.
They, in turn, have usually learned to adapt to this situation by coyly seeking refuge behind sweeping generalities the likes of "many (but *not* all) green-eyed subjects *sometimes* display a *slight* tendency to be *marginally* more susceptible".

Those, on the other hand, who insist on being *more* specific are sooner or later inevitably confronted by maddeningly contradictory results.
Such as Wagstaff's (1981) account of the once-so-promising "brain-hemisphere dominance" theory:

> Bakan [1969] found that hypnotically susceptible subjects showed a tendency to move their eyes to the left when asked a question . . . Unfortunately, other studies have shown that the relationship between eye movement and hypnotic susceptibility is rather more complex and seems to occur primarily in right-handed males [Gur and Gur, 1974]. In fact, the opposite appears to occur in females; left-handed females who move their eyes to the *right* are more likely to be hypnotically susceptible [the relationship is negligible for left-handed males and right-handed females]. This is particularly confusing. (pp. 140-141)

Indeed it is.
In short, it might be overstating things, but not by much, to say that up till now we've tried to correlate hypnotic "susceptibility" with just about everything except buckteeth or bad breath; and all we really have to *show* for those efforts is a (constantly growing) heap of discarded theories.
In fact, the search for that ever-elusive "trait" has, for a multitude of reasons, been about as successful as was the search for the Holy Grail; and when all is said and done, the whole futile endeavor can best be placed in the proper perspective by paraphrasing William James:
It would be more rewarding to count and catalogue the rocks of New Hampshire than to reread the literature on the so-called characteristics of hypnotizability.

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Unfortunately then, it appears that there's no way to tell *just* by looking at someone how "susceptible" they're going to be to hypnosis. This, by the way, is a most regrettable

choice of words—implying a kind of *weakness* and bringing to mind phrases like "susceptible to chest colds", "susceptible to nosebleeds", etc.
Over the years, however, there *have* been a number of investigators who felt it was possible to *test* people for signs of susceptibility.

This was usually accomplished by provoking certain types of behaviors that were supposed to be indicative of trance (but which, as will be seen later on, could just as well have resulted from a combination of expectation and autosuggestion).
Be that as it may, as early as the mid-1800s, Gregory (1851) was reporting how "Major Buckley first ascertains whether his subjects are susceptible, by making with his hands passes above and below their hands, from the wrist downwards. If certain sensations, such as tingling, numbness, &c. are strongly felt, he knows that he will be able to produce the magnetic sleep" (p. 361).
Underhill (1868/1902), by the same token, had claimed that "if the person upon whom you make the trial is very susceptible to magnetism, their fingers will involuntarily rise toward yours. They will often be thrown apart, like bodies similarly electrified. Sometimes the sensation is tingling and not cool. On very susceptible persons to magnetism, it can be felt ten, twenty, and even thirty feet (away), when awake" (p. 56).

We should only be so lucky.

Other investigators chose to experiment rather with certain *gadgets* designed specifically for that purpose.
Take for instance the "hypnoscope" introduced by Ochorowicz in 1887 (see the *Revue de l'Hypnotisme*, 1:49-57).
Moll (1889/1909) described the thing as follows: "It is an iron magnet in the form of a ring, which the person to be tested puts on his finger. Hypnotizable persons are supposed to experience certain sensations in the skin or twitchings of the muscles, while with the insusceptible nothing of the kind takes place" (p. 48).
Emile Boirac (1918), on the other hand, gives quite a different account of its efficacy—as well as that of another such contraption.
To hear him tell it,

> Dr. Ochorowicz has proposed his "hypnoscope", a magnetic steel tube which is put on the finger like a ring. Anyone who feels marked sensations of chill, of numbness, etc. is, it is said, suggestible and hypnotizable. But Dr. Crocq Jr., of Brussels, declares that he has never observed any constant action with this apparatus, and that everything has always depended upon

> autosuggestion. The "Sensitivometer" of Durville, a curved magnetic steel bar which is placed round the wrist, the negative pole being put beside the thumb, does not appear (either) to give many very sure indications. (pp. 83-84)

That was no coincidence.

By and large, however, the most *popular* means of testing for trance capacity would surely have to be the tactic of *challenging* subjects—e.g., sternly commanding them that they were utterly unable to either (1) open their eyes, (2) unclasp their hands, (3) speak their names, and so forth.

Consider the following example by Björnström (1887), which dates from the time of the Nancy School:

> I choose out of the company a woman having a pale and nervous appearance and dreamy eyes; I tell her that there is in my organism a strong evolution of electricity which enables me to electrize persons who are not too robust. As a proof of this, I let her with both hands seize two fingers of my right hand, and after a few seconds, I ask whether she feels anything. If she is susceptible to hypnotism, she usually answers that she feels a crawling sensation, and later a numbness of the arms and upper part of the body. Then I say: "Hold my hand tight-tighter-tighter still-well! Now you cannot let go my hand! . . . By this preliminary test I get a sure proof that the person is susceptible to actual hypnotization. (p. 16)

It was seen all throughout part 1 how this highly authoritarian technique was responsible for causing some rather serious misconceptions about the nature of the trance experience.

It will likewise be seen in part 2 how this development has *continued* right up to the present day because, incredible though it may seem, that *very* same "challenge" technique was going to be incorporated into the world's most "*modern*" susceptibility tests.

Tests that were boldly designed to reveal not only the simple presence or lack of "hypnotizability", but to scientifically "*measure*" each and every human being's *specific* "degree" of trance depth.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to present the "hypnotic susceptibility scales" . . .