

PREFACE

Suppose that there were no word or concept such as “hypnosis”, and that psychologists then discovered a technique whereby important aspects of a person’s belief system could be radically modified, for brief periods, by particular verbal inputs. Clearly, such a startling procedure would be seen to have to have the greatest of significance.

—McReynolds in Sheehan and Perry,
1976, p. 269

Indeed, you’d think the universal response to such a momentous discovery would be one of profound *delight*, while surely even that reaction would pale before the excitement caused by the finding that people who were hypnotized could sometimes learn to regulate “involuntary” bodily functions like circulation, markedly accelerate the healing process, or (once again—by means of simple *speech*) be helped to reduce chronic intractable pain.

It was, after all, the stuff Nobel prizes were made of, and it’s not very likely that the implications would have been lost on anyone.

Back here on earth, however, it seems that despite more than two centuries of having tacitly recognized its *enormous* potential utility, the phenomenon of hypnosis has commonly been regarded with outright Fear and Loathing.

Instead of hypnotists being looked upon as gentle, benevolent, Albert Schweitzer-type healers, they’ve invariably been characterized rather as sinister, Rasputin-like villains with dark, piercing eyes; a penetrating, merciless stare; and a powerful, domineering will.

In fact, the popular reaction to the whole subject of trance was perhaps best captured by Estabrooks and Gross' (1961) candid observation that, to many people, the very *word* "hypnosis" still evokes "a whole series of lurid visions more properly associated with tales of horror, murder, and creatures that walk by night". (p. 88)

What I wanted to know was: how did it ever come to *this*, for crying out loud? How is it possible that something as potentially *beneficial* to humanity as hypnosis ever came to be regarded in such a *horrible* manner?

I intend to show that the history of hypnotism provides us with the clue to this unfortunate legacy. You see, the one common denominator found all throughout mankind's two-hundred-plus-year investigation of trance has been this *image* problem—the universal perception that hypnosis is a *sinister* force capable of "overpowering" the minds of hapless subjects.

As will be revealed in the following chapters, that's the way people have *always* tended to regard the phenomenon—whether back in Mesmer's time in the later 1700s, all throughout the course of the nineteenth century, and, as everyone reading this is probably aware of, during most of the twentieth as well.

Why, to hear Aaronson (1973, p. 93) tell it, *even* nowadays, though hypnosis appears to have finally gained acceptance as a "proper" area of scientific study, the word *hypnosis* continues to evoke disturbing images of illegitimately held power; and researchers in hypnosis must continually justify their morals, motivation, methodology, and conclusions to a degree seldom demanded of researchers in *other* areas of the behavioral sciences.

Now, if we stop to consider just how great a part this attitude has always played in *preventing* mankind's acceptance of the phenomenon, it hardly seems irrelevant to wonder, *whatever* happened to make our image of trance so consistently *disagreeable* over the years?

Even more important perhaps is the question of what can still be causing so many people to *persist* in regarding hypnosis this way.

There is much historical evidence to suggest that the answer to this problem lies in our *manner* of employing the phenomenon.