

What Are the Myths of Hypnosis vs. the Facts?

Kayden Ho

Department of English, Anoka Ramsey Community College

ENGL 1121: College Writing and Critical Reading

Prof. Chris McCarthy

November 12, 2023

What Are the Myths of Hypnosis vs. the Facts?

“You’re getting very sleepy,” a hypnotist says. You feel your eyes grow weaker and your shoulders untense as you listen to the sound of his voice. “You’ll feel your eyes grow tired and your body relax,” he says. *How does he know? Is he reading my mind? Is he some sort of wizard?* No, he isn’t reading your mind, and although hypnotists may seem mystical, they’re just professionals that are good at what they do. Many people think that hypnosis, or hypnotherapy, is some sort of telekinetic superpower or that it’s the hypnotist’s way of putting you in a deep amnesia to completely take over your mind and body. Some think that it’s some sort of comical performance that’s made to embarrass you, maybe even to determine your level of gullibility. I can completely understand how these ideas may seem factual, as hypnosis has been presented as all these in the media for decades, but really hypnosis is simply a proficient medical and therapeutic treatment that’s very important to peoples’ health and wellness. It has constantly been distorted in movies and television shows and that misrepresentation doesn’t need to continue.

Initially, it’s quite normal to ask, *so what is hypnosis?* Well, according to the Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research (2022), hypnosis is “a changed state of awareness and increased relaxation that allows for improved focus and concentration,” and was first recorded to be used in the 18th century. Franz Mesmer was a German physicist who used hypnosis to treat patients in Paris, France and Vienna, Austria during that time. He called it “animal magnetism” and believed it worked by passing a mystical energy from the hypnotist to the person trying to be hypnotized, according to Encyclopedia Britannica (2019). Later in the 1840s, a surgeon named James Braid introduced the term “hypnosis” like we use today, and said it was a “sleeplike trance,” but this has been proven false. In current times, hypnosis is most often thought of as a therapeutic and medical way to tap into our unconscious minds and

overthrow our “conscious defenses,” says 20th century psychiatrist Milton Erickson, according to Noam Shpancer in his article “5 Myths About Hypnosis, and the Truth” (2023), but hypnosis honestly doesn’t have a definite definition. Nobody knows how it occurs quite yet, but theories along the lines of Erickson’s are the best evidential definitions to date.

Primarily, one of the biggest myths of hypnosis is that it’s all faked or exaggerated for entertainment purposes. Hypnosis, as many know it, can be entertaining, weird fun done on stage for comedy skits; however, that’s not all hypnosis consists of. In the podcast *Science Vs.* during the episode titled “Hypnosis” (2016), host Wendy Zukerman reflects on her experiences going to a live hypnosis show. The people that went up on stage and volunteered to be hypnotized ended up doing weird things like giving lap dances and getting high off imaginary marijuana. This is most often what people think of when they hear hypnosis; weird, hilarious actions. This is what I’ve thought of to be real hypnosis before I took a college psychology class and began to research. But in professional hypnotist Ben Cale’s Ted Talk “Hypnosis, finally explained,” (2019) he states that hypnosis on stage can be completely fake, but in true forms of stage hypnosis, the subject truly believes they are hypnotized. He thinks hypnosis is a simple “persuasion process” where the subjects on stage are fully convinced, they are being controlled by the hypnotist. So, in terms of entertainment-based hypnosis, it can be faked, but in real medical and therapeutic cases it isn’t. Entertainment-based hypnosis is simply a show, so don’t define hypnosis with those silly stories in mind.

Additionally, another misconception about hypnosis is that the hypnotist is going to make you do embarrassing things, like quacking like a duck or revealing deep, dark secrets. This may be true in entertainment hypnosis, but again, it’s not true for medical and therapeutic hypnosis. Real practices of hypnotherapy are meant to be used for issues like PTSD, phobias, losing

weight, quitting smoking, insomnia, menopausal hot flashes, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), pain during childbirth, post-chemotherapy symptoms like nausea or vomiting, and much more, claim professionals at Cleveland Clinic in the article “Hypnosis: What it is, why it’s done, benefits & risks” (n.d.). For example, celebrity actress Jessica Alba has used a type of hypnosis called ‘hypnobirthing’ to help get rid of some stress and pain during childbirth, mentions Greg Thompson in his article “True celebrity hypnotherapy success stories: Moving Minds.” It helped her through her childbirth and relieved her of major anxiety and discomfort. But all in all, professional hypnotists are only going to access the objectives you mention during your session, says Nitin Shah in his article, “Common myths and misconceptions about hypnosis and hypnotherapy” (2023). You don’t need to worry about embarrassing yourself by doing weird things under hypnosis-- like meowing like a cat-- if you go to a trusted medical hypnotherapist. They are professionals that are trying to accomplish the best care they can for you, not entertainers trying to get an audience to laugh. They’re performing for you, not others.

Commonly in hypnosis’ early discovery, it was presumed magic or “special powers” that the hypnotists had, but that isn’t true even despite everything you see about hypnosis in the media. Hypnotists are completely normal humans that are trained to perform hypnosis techniques on their patients, as stated previously. They are trained and taught with real research, not information they found in a ‘magic spell book.’ Shah (2023) says, “Lack of awareness combined with how entertainment media has projected hypnosis has led to widespread misconceptions and myths about it and its application in therapy,” which explains the common misconceptions of hypnosis in media that can damage the reputation of medical hypnotherapy. Not everything you see in the media is true. The media has falsely proclaimed hypnotherapy as a mysterious superpower or “magic,” when really, it’s anything but. If you ask someone close to you, maybe a

family member or friend, they'll tell you they've seen movies and television shows with "hypnosis" represented in them. Many of them might say that the hypnotist was some awkward weirdo that obviously made the person being hypnotized a bit uncomfortable. However, hypnotists are medical professionals, not some creep who gives you the heebie-jeebies. It's important to separate these fictional ideas with factual information.

Importantly, an additional false claim about hypnosis says you experience amnesia while you're hypnotized or that you're just in a deep sleep, but this has been disproven. You're fully conscious, awake, and coherent while under hypnosis. It's common for people to fear losing consciousness when experiencing hypnotherapy, but you're always awake and aware during the process. There are going to be times in hypnosis when you're so calm that you aren't going to be able to remember everything, but it's because your brain is extremely relaxed and focused on the hypnotist. You'll remember who you are, what you're doing, and where you're at, and you are always able to snap out of hypnosis if you want. You wouldn't be able to do so if you weren't fully conscious. During Wendy Zukerman's (2016) time at a live hypnosis show, she volunteered to go up and be hypnotized. It was somewhat successful for her; however, when the hypnotist started to ask the people on stage to do some strange things, she snapped out of it and went back to her seat. Though she was under hypnosis she was able to step out of the situation when it made her uncomfortable. Her experience was entertainment-based hypnosis, but the same rules apply for therapeutic hypnotherapy.

In addition, a frequently false notion of hypnosis says you must be "weak-minded" or gullible to be hypnotized, however, that's not true. Anyone can be hypnotized no matter how intelligent or non-gullible they are. For some it may take longer, or it might not work the first time, but that doesn't mean they're incapable of being hypnotized. Nitin Shah (2023) says,

“Strength of mind really has little to do with it,” it’s simply just the person and if they’re open-minded and non-distracted enough to undergo it. If you do fully enter hypnosis, that’s okay. It’s crucial to know that if you are easily hypnotizable it doesn’t mean you’re unintelligent, it might just mean you’re more comfortable or more open to hypnosis than others.

The finally, probably one of the more important misconceptions to be aware of, is that the hypnotist has absolute full control over you during hypnosis. Hypnotists serve only as a guide to get you to do something you’ve already been wanting to do. In fact, you’re more of a hypnotist than they are. You convince yourself that the hypnotist controls you, when really, it’s you who is perceiving it to be that way. Ben Cale (2019) summarizes this perfectly when he says, “People are just exploiting the belief that they’re being controlled by someone or something else to give themselves the legitimacy to do what they already wanted to do and be who they already wanted to be.” So really, the hypnotherapist is an attendant on your hypnosis journey. They are there to get you to the state of hypnosis and to guide you along to hopefully achieve your wanted outcomes.

All things considered, hypnosis isn’t just entertainment or “sorcery,” it isn’t to embarrass you or make you spill your guts, knock you unconscious, show your weak-mindedness, or put you to sleep. It’s made to help you. My great grandpa suffers from PTSD so I initially wanted to research hypnosis to see if it’s something that could work to help him. He’s tried many forms of therapy to try and treat aspects of his PTSD, and not one yet has aided him well enough. But after doing some research I honestly believe hypnotherapy could. Hypnosis is such an incredible and natural way to help treat mental illness/psychological issues and physical difficulties, too. It can help you with problems you weren’t sure if you could help before. It could benefit you if you

feel like you're running out of options. So, if you decide to try hypnosis, don't be threatened by the *magical powers* of the hypnotist; it's only his job.

References

Cale, B. (2019, June). Hypnosis, Finally explained. *TEDx Technion*.

https://www.ted.com/talks/ben_cale_hypnosis_finally_explained

Encyclopedia Britannica. (2019, August 15). Hypnosis. *Britannica Academic*. <https://academic-eb-com.accarcproxy.mnpals.net/levels/collegiate/article/hypnosis/41814>

Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2022, November 17). Hypnosis. *Mayo Clinic*. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/hypnosis/about/pac-20394405#:~:text=Hypnosis%20is%20a%20changed%20state,people%20feel%20calm%20and%20relaxed>.

Professional, C. C. medical. (n.d.). Hypnosis: What it is, why it's done, benefits & risks. *Cleveland Clinic*. <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/22676-hypnosis>

Shah, N. (2023, August 30). Common myths and misconceptions about hypnosis and hypnotherapy. *ICHARS*. <https://instituteofclinicalhypnosis.com/hypnosis/common-myths-hypnosis/>

Shpancer, N. (2023, September 1). 5 myths about hypnosis, and the truth. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/insight-therapy/202308/hypnosis-seperating-fact-from-fiction>

Thompson, G. (2020, March 23). True celebrity hypnotherapy success stories: Moving Minds. *Moving Minds Hypnotherapy Gold Coast*.

<https://www.movingmindshypnotherapy.com.au/true-celebrity-hypnotherapy-success-stories/>

Zukerman, W. (Host). (2016, September). Hypnosis (No. 8). [Audio podcast episode]. In *Science Vs.* Gimlet.

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/75FxADLe3Co6PiQdyrAlz0?si=CIEowjsSQLi7Q5kdhGd9mw>