



Hypnosis, hypnotic suggestibility, memory, and involvement in films



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ABSTRACT

Our research extends studies that have examined the relation between hypnotic suggestibility and experiential involvement and the role of an hypnotic induction in enhancing experiential involvement (e.g., absorption) in engaging tasks. Researchers have reported increased involvement in reading (Baum & Lynn, 1981) and music-listening (Snodgrass & Lynn, 1989) tasks during hypnosis. We predicted a similar effect for film viewing: greater experiential involvement in an emotional (*The Champ*) versus a non-emotional (*Scenes of Toronto*) film. We tested 121 participants who completed measures of absorption and trait dissociation and the Harvard Group Scale of Hypnotic Susceptibility and then viewed the two films after either an hypnotic induction or a non-hypnotic task (i.e., anagrams). Experiential involvement varied as a function of hypnotic suggestibility and film clip. Highly suggestible participants reported more state depersonalization than less suggestible participants, and depersonalization was associated with negative affect; however, we observed no significant correlation between hypnotic suggestibility and trait dissociation. Although hypnosis had no effect on memory commission or omission errors, contrary to the hypothesis that hypnosis facilitates absorption in emotionally engaging tasks, the emotional film was associated with more commission and omission errors compared with the non-emotional film.

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1. Introduction

From the time that Hilgard (1965) posited a relation between hypnosis and imaginative involvement, hypnosis researchers have studied the association between experiential involvement in imaginative activities and individual differences in hypnotic responsiveness. Experiential involvement may be described as an attentional state in which an object of attention, such as a mental picture, a keyboard sonata, or a scenic vista, becomes more “pronounced” in subjective experience than usual, with concomitant exclusion or attenuation of awareness of competing stimuli. Such experiences bear similarity to other constructs characterized by intense engagement, including flow and peak experiences (Wild, Kuiken, & Schopflocher, 1995). Sharp disengagement from the workaday concerns and activities that normally occupy awareness in daily life often accompany experiential involvement (Dewey, 1934), which, in turn, is associated with the capacity to become psychologically absorbed in private experiences or aspects of the environment (Roche & McConkey, 1990). Experiential involvement may be highly imaginative in nature, characterized by openness to novel and/or fantastical ideas or imagery and suspension of disbelief (Hilgard, 1979), or relatively less imaginative, with the extent of engagement varying as a

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function of the properties of the attentional object (e.g., Baum & Lynn, 1981; Snodgrass & Lynn, 1989). High imaginative involvement, for example, may occur when one becomes highly absorbed in fantasy-based experiences, such as watching an evocative play or reading whimsical prose (Hilgard, 1979), whereas relatively unimaginative involvement may occur in concert with absorption in more concrete experiences, such as reading a technical manual or a scientific encyclopedia entry (Baum & Lynn, 1981).

Researchers have determined that a predilection for imaginative involvement and absorption/attentional engagement in everyday experiences correlates positively with hypnotic suggestibility (e.g., Fellows & Armstrong, 1977; Hilgard, 1965; Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974). The extant literature includes many studies in which small to moderate correlations are obtained between hypnotic responsiveness and measures of absorption and imaginative involvement (see Council, Kirsch, & Grant, 1996). However, researchers have also examined differences in suggestibility in response to stimuli that presumably vary in their capacity to elicit experiential involvement. For example, Baum and Lynn (1981) tested for differences in absorption between high and low suggestible participants in response to a highly imaginative (e.g., fantasy fiction) and relatively unimaginative (e.g., a technical encyclopedia entry) reading task. Consistent with Hilgard's (1965) observations, the researchers found that highly suggestible individuals became more absorbed than low suggestible participants in highly imaginative passages, but not more absorbed in relatively unimaginative passages. Baum and Lynn (1981) concluded that the relation between hypnosis and experiential involvement is specific to tasks that are conducive to imaginative involvement.

Snodgrass and Lynn (1989) evaluated the generalizability of the hypnotic suggestibility–task interaction in the context of a study in which participants who varied in hypnotic suggestibility (i.e., high, medium, low) were presented with classical musical passages rated for high and low imaginativeness. Notably, Hilgard (1974) subsumed music listening under the broad rubric “savoring of sensory experience,” an activity she observed to be especially engaging for highly suggestible people. Like Baum and Lynn (1981), experiential involvement was assessed with a single composite variable comprised of three component indices that together represented an attentional dimension of absorption (Snodgrass & Lynn, 1989).

Consistent with Baum and Lynn (1981), the researchers found that highly suggestible participants reported greater experiential involvement than low suggestible participants during highly imaginative musical pieces but not during less imaginative pieces. Although the researchers reported that high and low suggestible subjects differed in terms of imaginative involvement in the passages, regardless of the imaginativeness level of the music, they found no significant differences between high and medium and medium and low groups across measures of involvement, suggesting a continuum of involvement.

The present study was designed to further explore the link between hypnotic responsiveness and stimuli that evoke different levels of involvement in terms of experientially engaging versus relatively non-engaging film clips. Researchers have used films since at least 1962 (Lazarus, Speisman, Mordkoff, & Davison, 1962) to elicit temporary emotional and behavioral responses from participants. Since that time, investigators have developed and refined a corpus of clips able to elicit distinct emotions (e.g., Gross & Levenson, 1995; Philippot, 1993; Schaefer, Nils, Sanchez, & Philippot, 2010). Comprehensive reviews (e.g., Rottenberg, Ray, & Gross, 2007) indicate that most contemporary researchers have used films originally validated by Gross and Levenson (1995), with many studies presenting a particular scene from the 1979 drama, *The Champ* (Lovell & Zeffirelli, 1979), to elicit sadness. The singular ability of this scene to elicit sadness has prompted journalists to declare the film to be “the saddest movie ever made” (e.g., Chin, 2011), which motivated the use of this particular clip in the present research. We expected that this evocative clip would elicit participants' experiential involvement in the film, as operationalized in the present study.

Hilgard (1970) observed that the strength of an individual's identification (i.e., emotional connectedness) with fictional characters often predicted hypnotic responsiveness; relatedly, Sarbin and Lim (1963) reported a positive relation between role-taking ability and hypnotic suggestibility. More recently, researchers have provided additional empirical support for a relation between affective emulation and hypnotic suggestibility. For example, Cardeña, Terhune, Löf, and Buratti (2009) observed a positive association between hypnotic suggestibility and measures of emotional contagion, defined as participants' propensities to synchronize with and/or mimic others' affective demeanor.

Accordingly, we predict that hypnotic suggestibility will be associated with experiential involvement, as indexed by elevated self-reported emotional engagement, absorption, attentiveness to, and interest in the film clip. In keeping with previous studies, we predict that hypnotic suggestibility will not be associated with experiential involvement in a comparably less engaging film clip (i.e., a silent bus tour of downtown Toronto void of narrative or features emotionally evocative for most people).

Like Snodgrass and Lynn (1989), we examine potential interactions of stimuli of different levels of potential engagement across the spectrum of hypnotic suggestibility (i.e., high, medium, low). Our study extends previous research by evaluating the effects of a hypnotic induction versus a non-hypnotic condition (i.e., solving anagrams). We hypothesize that the hypnotic induction will augment experiential involvement relative to a non-hypnotic condition. Precisely why hypnosis facilitates experiential involvement remains unclear; however, recent research examining the relation between hypnosis and absorption has capitalized on findings pertaining to the default network, a neural network associated with mind-wandering and daydreaming (e.g., Smallwood, McSpadden, & Schooler, 2008). Deeley et al. (2014) observed reductions in default network activity and increases in activity in prefrontal attentional systems associated with enhanced absorption following a hypnotic induction. The authors concluded that hypnosis may facilitate a state of attention neurally distinct from “spontaneous thought.”

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