hypnosis
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hypnosis

A Brief History

JUDITH PINTAR AND STEVEN JAY LYNN
In Memory of John F. Chaves (1941–2008)
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Throughout its long history, hypnosis has been employed not only as a medical and psychotherapeutic tool, but also as a spiritual practice, an enduring form of entertainment, and a springboard for inquiry into the study of human consciousness. Theories about hypnosis, as well as popular ideas about its nature, have been repeatedly championed, rejected, and revived—and in the process have continuously contradicted, influenced, and fed back into one another. Acknowledging this complex relationship, we will be following common themes that appear throughout the history of hypnosis in both its psychotherapeutic and more popular forms.

The first thread that we will be tracing through this volume has to do with the hypnotic relation, particularly the assumptions made about the personal character of the hypnotic subject on one hand, and the skill of the hypnotist on the other. The second thread traces shifting beliefs about the nature of hypnosis; more specifically, which phenomena that occur as part of a hypnotic induction are essential, and which are epiphenomenal products of suggestion. Finally, we will examine references to the apparent power of hypnosis over memory and personal identity. At the end of the twentieth century, this aspect of hypnosis provided flint and tinder for a range of controversies, from professional and legal battles over the role of hypnosis in the creation of false memories, to the validity of the diagnosis of multiple personality disorder. The association of hypnosis with disruptions in identity, which seems so contemporary, had in fact already begun more than a century before.

In Chapter One we employ the popular late nineteenth century novel, *Trilby*, to illustrate key issues that will be explored...
historically through the rest of the book. The story of hypnosis proper begins in Chapter Two with the Viennese physician, Anton Mesmer, who discovered the healing properties of an invisible force he first termed “animal gravity.” Mesmer’s therapeutic techniques, which soon came to be known synonymously as “animal magnetism” or “mesmerism,” are commonly understood to be the direct antecedents of hypnosis. We discuss mesmerism’s influence on medicine during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the controversies that surrounded the practice. We then tell the story of one of Mesmer’s followers, the Marquis de Puységur, and his transformations of Mesmer’s techniques.

In Chapter Three we consider the nineteenth century manifestations of mesmerism in Britain and the beginnings of what is considered to be modern hypnosis. The work of the students of Mesmer and Puységur in the early nineteenth century helped to bring about a surge of interest in mesmerism in mid-century Europe, in both its medical and popular forms. Key elements of mesmerism were reframed in England in the nineteenth century by James Braid, the Scottish doctor who is responsible for placing the word “hypnosis” into the medical vocabulary. Chapter Four explores the social and cultural impacts of the popular manifestations of mesmerism in the United States during the same period, as well as its relationship to intellectual and spiritual movements taking place there throughout the nineteenth century.

The work of Jean-Martin Charcot in France is taken up in Chapter Five as we detail some of the most famous episodes in the history of hypnosis. The experiments taking place at the research hospital, the Salpêtrière, at the end of the nineteenth century involved hysteria, hypnosis, somnambulism, and dissociation. They inspired an intellectual battle that raged between the Salpêtrière and the researchers at the Nancy School, whose views on hypnosis can be said eventually to have “won.” Hypnosis disappeared as a favored clinical technique after Charcot’s death and Pierre Janet’s lessening influence on the field, a trend that coincided with the rise of Sigmund Freud and psychoanalytic theory. Hypnosis continued to thrive outside the mainstream, however, in alternative and popular psychological practices.

We look at hypnosis in theory and research during the first half of the twentieth century in Chapter Six. The research contributions of Clark Hull and the therapeutic innovations of Milton Erickson
are generally credited with inspiring the mainstream scientific and clinical revivals of hypnosis that were to follow, but they were not the only players in the field. In Chapter Seven we highlight the polarization of “state” and “non-state” positions among theoreticians during the later twentieth century, tracing the changing terms of the debate, as well as other key points of theoretical disagreement that drove hypnosis research during this period.

We arrive at the controversies of the late twentieth century in Chapter Eight. Hypnosis received tremendous attention as it found itself embroiled at the center of the false memory debates, and the question of whether psychotherapists using hypnosis were creating dissociative symptoms in their clients. We assess the significance of these controversies for their place in the larger story of the development of hypnosis in theory and practice. We conclude this brief history of hypnosis in Chapter Nine by noting the widespread and mainstream applications of hypnosis that came to be employed as treatment for a variety of psychological and medical conditions by the end of the twentieth century, and by speculating on the theoretical issues that will continue to be investigated into the twenty-first.

We were fortunate in the preparation of this book that there exists such a rich body of scholarship relating to the histories of mesmerism and hypnosis. Among the many works that have made substantive contributions to the field, we would like to acknowledge six in particular that we found to be indispensable resources, and that we recommend to readers who wish to undertake a deeper exploration of particular historical periods surveyed in this volume. Frank Pattie’s *Mesmer and Animal Magnetism* offers a thorough and insightful history of the life and works of Mesmer. In *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic sleep and the roots of psychological healing*, Adam Crabtree traces the connections between mesmerism and later developments in psychology. Alison Winter offers a critical analysis of the social and cultural context within which mesmerism thrived in Victorian England in *Mesmerized: Powers of mind in Victorian Britain*, and Robert C. Fuller, in *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls*, analyzes the relationship of the nineteenth century magnetizers to spiritual seekers and religious movements in the United States. Touching on many aspects of mesmerism and hypnosis, Henri Ellenberger’s highly acclaimed history, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, presents a particularly detailed picture of hypnosis in late nineteenth century France.
and Germany. Finally, Alan Gauld’s encyclopedic work, *A History of Hypnotism*, remains the most comprehensive and significant secondary source for the first two hundred years of history for both mesmerism and hypnosis.

We would like to acknowledge Irving Kirsch, John Kihlstrom, and John Chaves, as well as our anonymous readers, for their careful assessment of the book at its different stages, and their constructive suggestions for its improvement. J.P. would like to express her gratitude to David Hopping for his inexhaustible intellectual and personal support. S.J.L. would like to acknowledge Sean Barnes for his help with the final preparation of the manuscript, and to express his appreciation of Fern Pritikin Lynn’s love, support, and understanding during the writing of the book.
I will tell you a secret. There were two Trilbys. There was the Trilby you knew, who could not sing one single note in tune. She was an angel of paradise. She is now! But she had no more idea of singing than I have of winning a steeplechase at the Croix de Berny. She could no more sing than a fiddle can play itself! She could never tell one tune from another—one note from the next … But all at once—pr-r-r-out! presto! Augenblick! … with one wave of his hand over her—with one look of his eye—with a word—Svengali could turn her into the other Trilby, his Trilby—and make her do whatever he liked … you might have run a red-hot needle into her and she would not have felt it. He had but to say ‘Dors!’ and she suddenly became an unconscious Trilby of marble, who could produce wonderful sounds—just the sounds he wanted, and nothing else—and think his thoughts and wish his wishes—and love him at his bidding with a strange, unreal factitious love … just his own love for himself turned inside out—a l’envers—and reflected back on him, as from a mirror … un echo, un simulacre, quoi! pas autre chose! … Ah monsieur, that Trilby of Svengali’s! I have heard her sing to kings and queens in royal palaces! as no woman ever sung before or since.1

First serialized in Harper’s Magazine in 1894, George du Maurier’s novel of hypnosis, Trilby, was a phenomenal bestseller. Its publication set off a marketing frenzy during which the heroine’s name was bestowed upon a hat, several shoes designs, candy, toothpaste, soap, a brand of sausage, and even a town in Florida. Trilby’s face appeared on dolls, fans, writing paper, puzzles, and there were ice cream bars made in the shape of her feet. Trilby clubs were formed and parties held where guests would perform dramatic readings from the novel, or dress up in tableaux vivants, to match the story’s illustrations.2