

WILL HYPNOTIZED PERSONS TRY TO HARM
THEMSELVES OR OTHERS?

BY LOYD W. ROWLAND

University of Tulsa

THE purpose of this experiment is to determine the extent to which deeply hypnotized persons (1) will subject themselves to unreasonably dangerous situations and (2) will perform acts unreasonably dangerous to the welfare of others.

It is an old problem about which people have talked a great deal and experimented little. The consensus of opinion in the literature has been that the hypnotized person will *not* violate his own good judgment with respect to possible harm to self or others.¹ In the experiment to be outlined it was decided to examine this commonly accepted hypothesis by means of a new technique made possible by the development of invisible glass.

There are two parts to the experiment. In Part I the problem was to see if hypnotized subjects would expose themselves to danger; in Part II it was the problem to see if they would try to harm others.

PART I

Subjects. Four persons participated in Part I.

Subject A, female, a Junior in the University of Tulsa, preparing to teach in high school.

Subject B, male, co-captain of the University football team, a Senior.

Subject C, female, graduate student, with about twenty years' experience as grade-school teacher.

Subject D, female, about 24 years of age; made frequent visits to the staff of the Department of Psychology for help in the solution of some of her personal problems.

All subjects had been hypnotized at least twice, and there was evidence of deep hypnosis in all cases. There were contractions of muscle groups, amnesias, and hallucinations in all cases.

¹ Representative statements are as follows: Young (4, 511), ". . . it is agreed that the subject will not obey the operator in committing an act which is repugnant to the former's moral scruples." Schilder concludes (3, 33), "If a profoundly hypnotized person is asked to perform an act that is unreasonable, an act in contradiction with his total will, his total personality, the following may happen: In spite of his profound hypnosis, the hypnotized man may refuse to obey . . . or awake from his hypnosis if the demand of the hypnotizer as well as the total situation are no longer in accord with his other ego ideals." Hollander (1, 40) says, "Even a person in the hypnotic state will refuse to perform any act which is contrary to his or her natural disposition. But both normal and hypnotized people will readily accept any notion for which their own nature has already prepared them." Loewenfeld said in 1922 (2, Ch. 14) that to date "there is not a single well-authenticated case of severe crime perpetrated through hypnosis."

The subjects were hypnotized in a room across the hall from the large room in which the experiment proper took place.

Apparatus. A large box, open on the front side, was constructed; in the interior was placed a large sheet of glass, bent in such a way that all reflections were cast upward against a black baffleboard roof and there absorbed. In front of this sheet of glass was placed hardware cloth cut in the center and turned back in such a way that the whole box gave the appearance of being an animal cage. The glass in back of the hardware cloth was totally invisible.² The experimenter tested this fact by having several of his colleagues come in and reach for a hammer that was placed some distance back of the glass. Not one of them saw the glass, and one woman professor injured her finger when she struck the glass as she reached for the hammer.

A large diamond-back rattlesnake³ was placed in the box. The animal was allowed to stay in a warm room in the box three days until it became very lively. To add to the activity of the snake during the experiment, holes were bored in the box in many places and the snake poked by means of a wire to incite him to action. The result was a most frightful scene. The snake invariably wound himself into a coil with his head lifted ready to strike, his rattles singing loudly enough that they could be heard within a radius of 100 feet.

Condition I. (Subjects A and B.) The subject was placed in the room with the stimulus box and thirty feet from it. The following instructions were given:

"Do you see that box?" When the subject said, "Yes," the experimenter went on to say, "There is a piece of coiled rubber rope in that box. Go up to the box, reach through the screen wire, and pick it up."

Subject A went up to the box slowly, without perceptible change of pace until she got to the box. She seemed surprised at first touching the glass. She hesitated a moment and then began to explore the surface of the glass for an opening. Finding no opening, she spread her hand on the glass and began to push. Even though the glass was of heavy plate, some danger was involved if she pushed too hard, and the experimenter asked her to stop exploring the glass.

Asked one week later, while awake, if she could conjecture why she had been willing to expose herself to such a great danger, subject A said that she did not know why, but that she supposed she was confident that the experimenter would not allow her to be harmed. Actually, subject A remembered nothing about the incident, and was only giving her judgment as to the cause of her behavior.

Subject B went immediately to the box, saw the snake, turned around facing the experimenter and awoke. The experimenter asked if he were awake and he said that he was. (It is only fair to say that the experimenter was sceptical beforehand of the depth of trance of this particular subject.)

Condition II. (Subjects C and D.) The hypnotized subjects were taken into the experimental room in full sight of the cage (or box), but thirty feet from it, and asked these questions; the answer, "Yes," was expected and received in every case:

² The apparatus is being manufactured by the C. H. Stoelting Co., who issue a leaflet describing it. The device is called the "Rowland Stimulus Box."

³ Furnished and handled by Mr. Hugh Davis, Curator of Mohawk Zoo, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

"Have you ever seen a rattlesnake? Is a rattlesnake dangerous? Do you see that box? There is a rattlesnake in that box. Go up to it and reach through the opening in the screen wire and pick up the snake. Go right ahead."

Subject C went directly to the box, stopped briefly when she came in sight of the coiled snake. When the experimenter⁴ urged her by saying, "Go ahead," she thrust her hand through the wire opening and gave evidence of surprise when she touched the glass. She explored the surface area of the glass but showed no tendency to reach for an opening through the glass as A had done.

Subject D went directly to the apparatus, reached in and touched the glass. She touched the glass in several places until, finding no opening, she stopped and took two steps back from the box and stood, apparently uncertain as to what next to do.

PART II

In this part of the experiment the object was to see whether subjects would perform acts unreasonably dangerous to others.

The apparatus was modified by removing the snake, and the hardware cloth from in front of the glass. Further, a section 12 x 14 inches was cut from the back of the box, and against this opening the head of the author appeared during the part of the experiment about to be described. The author's face was well lighted and he read from a book. It must be remembered that the subjects saw nothing intervening between themselves and the author.

The subjects participating in Part II were as follows:

Subject E, female, 16 years of age, a high school student.

Subject F, male, coach of high school athletics, a graduate student.

The procedure was as follows: The subject, hypnotized, was brought into the presence of the stimulus box. Thereupon the experimenter poured sulphuric acid from a bottle into a glass, and, in the presence of the subject, dipped a strip of zinc into the acid. The reaction was strong, with fumes steaming from the mouth of the glass. The subject was then asked, "Do you know what sulphuric acid is?" and regardless of the answer the explanation was given that "sulphuric acid is very dangerous. It will scar the skin and put out the eyes." The subject was then told to pick up the glass and throw the acid at the author's face, the author being protected, of course, by the invisible glass.

Subject E picked up the glass and was very reluctant to throw the acid. She hesitated; the experimenter insisted and finally said, "I'm going to count three and when I finish you will throw the acid. One, two, three." The subject threw the acid, set down the glass, shuddered and covered her face with her hands. She seemed very much disturbed.

Subject F was instructed in the same way as Subject E. He picked up the acid, hesitated a moment, and then threw it with such force that the acid spread all over the surface of the invisible glass.

By way of a control, forty-two persons, of every age and degree of sophistication, were asked to come to the laboratory and pick up the snake, as in Part I of the experiment. With one exception all the persons were not only badly frightened at the appearance of the snake, but would not come close to the box; only a few were persuaded finally to pick up a yard stick and

⁴ Dean L. S. McLeod, the author's colleague in psychology, was experimenter for Condition II of Part I, and Part II.

try to touch the snake. They all seemed bewildered when they touched the glass which they could not see. The exception referred to was as follows: A young woman was told to reach for the snake and she did so at once, of course striking the glass. When asked why she complied so readily, she said that of course it was an artificial snake and she was not afraid of it. Assured that the snake was real, she made a closer examination of it. She then became frightened, and, even though she now knew she was protected, would not go near the box.

CONCLUSIONS

Within the limits of this experiment it seems possible to conclude that:

1. Persons in deep hypnosis will allow themselves to be exposed to unreasonably dangerous situations.
2. Persons in deep hypnosis will perform acts unreasonably dangerous to others.

A possible explanation, hinted at in two places in the account, is that confidence in the hypnotist causes the subject to forego his better judgment.

If the above conclusions be true, it follows as a very practical application that only professional psychologists and others adequately prepared should be permitted to make use of deep hypnosis.

The author feels that the common acceptance that hypnotized persons will not perform acts that violate their ideals is badly in need of re-examination.

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