

Hypnosis - the key to unlocking the delusional mind?

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Researchers at Macquarie University have developed an original new approach to the study of delusions, using hypnosis to temporarily create typical delusional beliefs in otherwise non-delusional people.

With backing from the Australian Research Council and Macquarie University, a group of psychologists from the Macquarie Centre for Cognitive Science (MACCS) have been investigating the effectiveness of using hypnosis as a technique for studying the delusion known as mirrored-self misidentification, and a range of other delusions also.

People suffering from mirrored-self misidentification believe that the person they see when they look in the mirror is not them, but some stranger who looks similar to them.

According to the researchers, one of the roadblocks to studying delusions is having access to research participants, as these delusions are not very common, and many who suffer from them are unwilling to participate in research.

Thinking outside the square, the Macquarie group - which includes Professor Max Coltheart, Associate Professor Amanda Barnier and Dr Robyn Langdon - teamed up with researchers from Leeds University, University College London and Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, to trial hypnosis as a technique for creating transient delusions that are resistant to challenge in non-delusional subjects.

"In psychology and medicine, there is a long tradition of using hypnosis to study clinical conditions that are otherwise difficult to bring into the laboratory," they explain. "It makes sense to use hypnosis to study delusions because they share many characteristics. Both involve distortions of reality, and in both, these distortions are believed with absolute conviction, are maintained regardless of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, and are resistant to rational counter arguments. We were confident therefore that hypnosis could help us to better understand the processes underlying clinical delusions."

Participants in the study received one of three hypnotic suggestions which were used to explore the different forms of initial thoughts that might 'seed' the delusion. The results indicated that the hypnotic suggestion created a credible, compelling delusion with features strikingly similar to clinical cases of mirrored-self misidentification. For instance, one participant who received the hypnotic suggestion to see a stranger in the mirror, not himself, opened his eyes to look in the mirror and immediately asked "Who's that?" as he looked around the room to find the person he believed was in the mirror.

"This study has laid the groundwork for future experiments which will examine the features and parameters of hypnotic delusions, the impact of challenging the delusions, and whether role-playing participants display the same behaviour as genuinely hypnotised participants," they explain. "Using hypnosis we expect to get a real sense of how to investigate, understand and confront delusional beliefs in a more effective way."

Source: Macquarie University

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