

Look into my eyes—why those who experience hypnosis are unlikely to be faking it

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Credit: University of Sussex

New research from scientists at the University of Sussex has taken a major step towards unlocking the secrets of hypnosis and gathering evidence that suggests that subjects aren't faking the effects of it.

Researchers at the Sackler Centre for Consciousness Science at the University of Sussex have utilised a simple trick of the mind to further investigate the idea that subjects under the spell of [hypnosis](#) are in fact experiencing hypnotic action as involuntary.

The trick involved measuring the reaction time of 18 people who were highly susceptible to hypnotism when they pressed a button, which triggered a beep after 250 milliseconds in three different circumstances – when pulled down involuntarily by a string, when they voluntarily chose to press it, and when they pressed it due to a hypnotic command.

When pressing due to hypnosis, the subject perceived the time between the pressing and the beep as being 156 milliseconds, in comparison to 176 milliseconds for those who had their finger pulled down and only 91 milliseconds for those who pressed it of their own accord.

When estimating the split-second timings, the hypnotised people behaved as though their actions were outside their control, in a way that would have been very difficult for them to fake.

The findings suggests that the hypnotised subjects' experience was a lot closer to that of the person whose finger had been pulled down involuntarily; adding credence to the belief that [experiences](#) of hypnosis feel as real to the subject as they look to the observer.

Speaking about the research, Peter Lush said:

"The reported experience of involuntariness is of vital importance to hypnotic responding, but before now there haven't been many experiments that have been able to prove that hypnotic action is genuinely experienced as involuntary; that subjects don't merely report that a movement feels involuntary whilst actually experiencing normal voluntary action.

"Our study was set up to ensure that this degree of shift in the reported time of events cannot easily be explained by participants wishing to conform to the demands of the task. The results suggest that people who experience involuntariness are genuinely experiencing changes in the

sense of agency over their actions."

However, Lush is keen to point out that while it is evidence that people responding to hypnotic suggestion are experiencing a sense of involuntariness in their movement, they are still unable to say precisely how this experience is generated

"This study does not tell us whether hypnotically suggested actions are genuinely involuntary, or whether it is the person's own experience of the action that changes. However, our interpretation of the results is that hypnotically suggested involuntary actions are voluntary actions that are experienced as involuntary."

More information: Peter Lush et al. The Power of Suggestion, *Psychological Science* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0956797616687015](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797616687015)

Provided by University of Sussex

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