

Variations in Post-hypnotic Suggestion for managing Dissociative Conversion Disorder using Projective Tests – A Case Study

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This paper explored the effect of variation of post-hypnotic suggestion on the management of dissociative conversion disorder in an adult woman. These suggestions were individualized for the patient using findings from the projective tests like Thematic Apperception Test and Sentence Completion Test. The tests were done during baseline phase and post-intervention phase. The patient had significantly lesser conflicts, improved attitude towards parents, greater self-confidence, and improved compassion towards herself during the post-intervention phase. Also, 9 sessions of hypnosis were done to reach complete recovery, but the patient showed significant improvement in the symptoms of dissociative conversion just after 2 sessions of hypnosis. Secondary gain also needed to be controlled during the final phase of the psychotherapy session in order to achieve complete recovery from dissociative conversion. The patient was followed up for 8 months thereafter. Currently, the patient is no longer having dissociative conversion attacks.

Introduction:

Patients having dissociative conversion are more susceptible to hypnosis compared to control group. Also, the more intense the symptoms of conversion, the higher is the hypnotic susceptibility of such patients. Hypnosis in combination with Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy has been used to treat patients having panic attacks. Sixteen sessions were done with the patient and the patient had only one panic attack after 3 years since completion of treatment (Singh & Banerjee, 2002). Moene et. al (2002) could successfully treat dissociative motor conversion using regular treatment methods in a randomized controlled trial and concluded a comprehensive psychotherapeutic program is more beneficial in treating symptoms of motor conversion, irrespective of the application of hypnosis. Lynn et. al (2002) demonstrated that there is an ambivalent relationship between hypnotic suggestibility and psychotherapeutic outcomes of dissociative conversion. Sengar et. al (2003) have treated male erectile dysfunction successfully using hypnotherapy. Oakley (2006) used hypnosis as a tool in experimental psychopathology research and found that for patients having dissociative motor conversion, during hypnotically induced motor paralysis of patient's leg, neurological reading showed that patient genuinely tried to move the leg but was unable to do so. Iglesias & Iglesias (2009) used information about motor conversion from patients by interviewing them using the Hypnotic Diagnostic Interview for Hysterical Disorders and used this data to effectively manage the conversion symptoms. Indian research has also applied hypnotherapy in treating anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders, panic attack, phobia, substance abuse, psychogenic impotence, psychogenic amnesia, nocturnal enuresis and erectile dysfunction (Singh, 2016). According to Bell et al. (2011), hypnotic trance results in a constellation of perceptual and cognitive alterations which are characterized by disruptions in otherwise intricate and integrated psychological systems. These disruptions are responsible for creating higher acceptance to suggestibility in patient. Also, individuals having dissociative disorders may have impaired working memory and lack of cognitive control. Hence, they respond to verbal suggestions with poorer cognitive resources resulting of poorer executive functioning control (Terhune et. al, 2017). Thus, post-hypnotic suggestion during the hypnotic trance works well in strengthening cognitive control and higher order executive functioning.

Hypnotherapy is also effective in producing positive outcomes in psychological blindness and deafness due to conversion disorder (Kundalia, Agila & Chandrani, 2019). Wieder et. al (2022) showed that increased hypnotic suggestibility leads to better treatment outcome in dissociative conversion disorder. However, these previous studies have not shown how the nature of post-hypnotic suggestion sometimes needs to be varied between sessions in order to fit the needs of the patient and help to manage the patient better. Hence this study is being reported as a single case study to show the effect of variation in post-hypnotic suggestion to manage a patient

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having dissociative conversion. Also, in most studies, hypnosis is usually used as an adjunct to other cognitive and behavioral therapies. However, in the current study hypnosis was used as a standalone treatment method.

Case report:

The index patient, Ms. A. K., 25 years old, female, Hindu, Hindi speaking, belonging to the urban area of Jamshedpur, currently pursuing Graduation, unmarried, unemployed was brought to RINPAS Stress Management Clinic with complaints of losing consciousness multiple times every day, increased palpitations, pain and heaviness in chest, dryness in mouth, decreased appetite for 6 months. Family history did not reveal any psychiatric illness. However, personal history revealed that the patient was having strained relationship with her father. She practiced switchboard communication with her father involving her mother into it to avoid direct confrontation and criticisms. Her mother was mostly indifferent to patient's symptoms. As reported by her parents, the patient was not on any psychotropic medication for her symptoms.

Findings of assessment:

Sack's Sentence Completion Test (SSCT):

This test was administered to assess the interpersonal conflicts and attitudes of the index patient. It was found that the patient has been significantly disappointed with her father because "she wanted her father to let her study more instead of getting her married off". It was also found that she wanted to establish herself as a professional but felt sad since she perceived her family as unsupportive which hindered her progress in professional field.

Thematic Apperception Test (TAT):

The TAT was administered to assess the dynamics of personality of the index patient. In the TAT it was found that the patient perceived herself to be helpless and lacking in confidence. It was also found that she found herself to be subjugated by her father, because of which she perceived her environment to be mostly dominating. As a result of this, she also had a Need for Aggression towards her father as found from the analysis of her responses to TAT cards. Mother was perceived to be mostly unsupportive towards her and she had an ambivalent attitude towards her mother. She also felt that her parents put more importance to her sibling's needs and demands than hers, because of which she perceived her environment to be depriving. There was a need for succorance and a need for affiliation as well. Her anxieties revealed fears of deprivation and lack or loss of love and being deserted. Conflicts revealed autonomy versus compliance which was evident as she learned to take autonomy from the perceived authoritarian father while being submissive to him at the same time.

In view of above findings, the post-hypnotic suggestions focused on building a sense of self-efficacy in the patient (you do whatever is right for you no matter what others say...you are a strong woman). Her perception towards her parents was altered from being perceived as punitive to being perceived as supportive so that she could auto-suggest herself to stand up for her rights and be assertive about her own needs and demands from her family, especially her father.

Stanford Hypnotic Clinical Scale:

She scored a plus in the items – Hand Lowering, Arm Rigidity, Dreams, Age Regression, and Posthypnotic response. She did not score plus in auditory hallucination suggestion. Overall, these indicated that she had adequate susceptibility to hypnosis.

Method and outcome of treatment:

Nine sessions were conducted with the patient. Treatment modalities consisted of –

- A. Hypnosis and Post-hypnotic suggestion
- B. Controlling Secondary Gain

Initial sessions:

Sessions were conducted at an interval of two weeks. During the baseline phase, she was having dissociative conversion episodes, that is, she was losing consciousness thrice to four times in a day. However, just after two sessions of hypnosis and post-hypnotic suggestion, the frequency of the conversion episodes decreased to around thrice to four times in a month. After the third session of hypnosis, the frequency decreased even further to once to none in a month as per the reports of her parents. The intensity of the dissociative symptoms also decreased after hypnosis – during the baseline phase, she remained unconscious for 2 to 3 hours at a stretch. However, after the third session of hypnosis, the duration of remaining unconscious decreased to around 20 minutes.

Standardized instructions given for Induction and Deepening stages by Brann, Owens, Williamson (2012) were used to induce hypnotic trance in the patient. After deepening was done, it was checked to see if it was induced properly by giving ideo-motor suggestion of lifting her hand to the patient. After she lifted the hand above 6 inches, could hold it for a minute and put it down again, the following post-hypnotic suggestion was given –

“...And now you are at a place where any suggestions you give yourself will sink deep down into your mind and begin to exert an effect on how you think....how you feel...how you behave....so that each time you use these techniques it will help you become more relaxed....now in a few moments...I invite you to consider yourself to be someone who is very strong and bold... You are expressing your own difficulties assertively to other people...you are standing up for your own rights to others.... You are an independent, strong woman....You do whatever you feel is right for you no matter what others say....You express your opinions and perspectives clearly to the other person....You take decisions for yourself...You communicate to your parents that you would marry only when you want to marry....You complete your studies at the earliest...start working. And then you might marry as you wish it to be... You express this wish clearly to your parents...your parents are your well-wishers...They are supportive in your decisions with marriage and career...And henceforth, you will not lose consciousness during conflicting times....You feel comfortable in communicating your needs and desires to your parents assertively....You will not lose consciousness anymore from now on in the event of a conflicting situation....(post-hypnotic suggestion ends here)...And take a deep breath in and breathe out....another deep breathe in...and exhale... and Now you are completely relaxed...Take a few more deep breaths...”

The post-hypnotic suggestion was given for 5 minutes at a stretch. Thereafter, the patient's attention was gradually brought back to the present situation, and she woke up.

However, after three more subsequent sessions, it was seen that, the patient progress ceased to happen. That is, even after repeated application of hypnosis and controlling secondary gain she was still having at least one or two conversion episodes for 15 to 20 minutes in a month and had significant anxiety in the form of palpitations, dry mouth. Hence it was decided that now the narrative of post-hypnotic suggestion has to be changed in order to now guide her towards a sense of recovery and instill relaxation in her.

Final Sessions:

During the final phase of the treatment, 4 more session were conducted. As has been already mentioned, the post-hypnotic suggestion was now changed to –

“...And now you are at a place where any suggestions you give yourself will sink deep down into your mind and begin to exert an effect on how you think....how you feel...how you behave....so that each time you use these techniques it will help you become more relaxed....now in a few moments...I invite you to realize that now you are completely out of all your difficulties... You are having a pleasant state of mind now....and now

that you are completely relieved you strive to realize your academic potential...to the maximum of your capability...and you continue to exercise the autonomy that you have gained...to complete your studies in the way that you have planned...and standing up to your parents, especially your father...in expressing your needs regarding your career and academics...and you will reach to the point in life where you want to reach...gaining financial independence...having a well-paying job as a teacher in school as you had always wanted...And you experience a feel-good thing about yourself engaging into this new venture...You are more confident about yourself now....Discovering yourself in a new light...Being self-reliant and confident about yourself...Keeping the past behind and looking towards a bright future that lies ahead of you....Letting yourself eventually marry a man who suits your needs while building a career of your choice...marriage and building a career are not conflicting goals in life.....letting yourself pursue both simultaneously....Willing to work even after marriage...Finding a man who suits your preferences regarding career and views about life...Stating this need to your family, your father...(post-hypnotic suggestion ends here)...And in a few moments...Taking a few deep breaths in and out....Again breathe in and out....again..."

This post-hypnotic suggestion was again given for 5 minutes after which the patient was gradually brought back to consciousness into the present moment.

Also, during the final phase of the therapeutic regime, it was seen that the patient's parents still served to maintain some secondary gain out of parental concern, as they still attended her and cared for her when she lost unconscious. This was serving to maintain her residual symptoms and was hindering her recovery. Hence, the parents were psycho-educated again to not pay any attention or offer any interpersonal care to the patient while she lost consciousness as that would come as a reinforcement for the patient and would serve to maintain her residual symptoms for longer durations. They were also psycho-educated that such behavior would also hinder the development of her sense of independence.

Hence, after 9 hypnosis sessions and better control secondary gain simultaneously, it was found that the patient had no dissociative conversion episodes, as reported by patient herself and her parents. TAT and SSCT were done again during the post-intervention phase and the findings suggested that the patient had better sense of self-control, regained sense of autonomy and self-efficacy, viewed herself in a more favorable light than earlier, became more assertive and forthcoming than before and presented herself to others with more confidence than earlier. She also developed more favorable and more empathetic attitude towards her parents and became more compassionate towards herself after the psychotherapy.

Thereafter, three in-person and four telephonic follow-up sessions were conducted. The patient herself, and her family again reported that she was maintaining well and did not have any episodes of dissociative conversions, palpitations, and anxiety for up to 8 months since follow up. It has been three months now since the last follow-up and she is currently maintaining well.

Discussion:

Hypnosis is a very common method for treating dissociative conversion disorder and is often considered as a first line treatment for dissociative disorders. There have been many studies till date showing its efficacy in such patients. The psychodynamic model states that patients having dissociative conversion experience have emotional conflicts but are unable to express them verbally or otherwise. Hence these emotional conflicts are repressed in their unconscious and later on expressed in the form of conversion symptoms (Peeling & Muzio, 2022). Hypnosis lowered the patient's conscious inhibition so that the clinician had access to her unconscious while she was in the hypnotic trance state. During this time, the clinician accessed her emotional conflicts and interpersonal inhibitions and in the post-hypnotic phase suggested her to be forthcoming about her needs in an assertive way, stand up for her own rights and to not lose consciousness in a conflicting situation. These

suggestions got ingrained in her sub-conscious mind and thus she could auto-suggest the same to herself outside session. This brought about a decrease in her symptoms. Gironell et. al (2021) assessed the efficacy of clinical hypnosis in a case series taking 50 patients having functional neurological disorder or conversion disorder. He used indirect hypnotic suggestions like puns, questions and implications which caused interruptions and disruptions in the patients' direct consciousness and facilitated them to accept direct suggestions. Usually, hypnosis is usually suggested to be used as an adjunct to other cognitive and behavioral therapies. However, in the current study hypnosis was used as a standalone treatment and the behavioral intervention to control secondary gain was in fact used as an adjunct to hypnosis. There are various kinds of dissociations namely dissociation of identity, memory, and consciousness. Since dissociative conversion disorder is a disorder defined by the dissociation of consciousness, hence accessing the patient's sub-conscious and unconscious by taking her to hypnotic trance to treat the conversion symptoms was efficacious in decreasing the patient's psychopathology (Singh & Kumar, 2020). Rafiq & Zaheer (2018) used Circle therapy in hypnosis. Only two sessions of hypnosis were conducted in this study and the symptoms of conversion completely and the patient maintained well for 11 months thereafter. This is like the current study where the patient showed significant improvement after only two sessions of hypnosis.

To explain the findings of the study neurologically, the activation of alpha waves during hypnotic trance might have lowered cognitive inhibition in the patient, making her suggestible to external suggestion from the clinician. However, gamma waves are activated in the brain during hypnotic trance especially when there is focal cortical activation in the brain (Lamb, 2011). Hence, there might have been focal cortical activity in the brain resulting in gamma wave activation during the post-hypnotic suggestion (Jensen, Adachi & Hakimian, 2015). However, a conclusive statement about the nature of brain waves could not be drawn from the present study because EEG could not be used to measure the same.

However, a distinct feature of the current study is that here, the narrative of post-hypnotic suggestion was changed and individualized in the final or later phase of the study to meet the patient's needs. That is, the post-hypnotic suggestion narrative was formulated in a way such that it alleviated the need for cognitive control to maintain submissiveness to her father and instead instilled the sense of autonomy. This sense of autonomy in turn might have helped her to gain conscious control over academic potential, confidence, helped her to be assertive about her needs and direct suggestion was also given about the same as individuals who go through hypnosis exhibit greater cognitive control than control patient. This is like an Indian study where hypnosis was used in conjunction with rational emotive behavior therapy to treat panic attacks and the results showed increased sense of control, improved self-confidence, and elimination of pathological psycho-physiological symptoms (Singh & Banerjee, 2002). The mechanism of cognitive control in hypnosis is also used in similar other illnesses like irritable bowel syndrome and psychosomatic disorders. The suggestive effects also work with the effectiveness of placebo psychotropic medicines in symptom relief or pain reduction. Hypnosis also works similarly as a non-deceptive placebo effect (Terhune et al., 2017).

The results of this study can be used in psychosomatic illnesses like somatoform disorders, anxiety disorders, acute stress reactions and even in behavioral syndromes like eating disorders, sleep disorders and sexual dysfunctions. The post-hypnotic suggestion may be varied in its nature of delivery and its content at every stage of the progress of the treatment to achieve maximum treatment efficacy in the individuals. In future, it is therefore recommended to use hypnosis as a primary mode of treatment in suggestible individuals to treat the mental disorders mentioned above to have longer lasting effects. Also, the current study showed how hypnosis produces quick and effective results in treating dissociative illness which might be a promising finding for its use in further research with patients susceptible to hypnosis. However, EEG was not used in the current study to monitor the patient's brain waves during different stages of hypnosis.

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