VIVID FANTASY AND HALLUCINATORY ABILITIES IN THE LIFE HISTORIES OF EXCELLENT HYPNOTIC SUBJECTS ("SOMNAMBULES"): PRELIMINARY REPORT WITH FEMALE SUBJECTS

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Throughout the history of hypnosis, excellent hypnotic subjects (sometimes referred to as somnambules or somnambulists) have been studied in terms of how they respond and what they experience when given suggestions to hallucinate, to age regress, to experience anesthesia, to go into a trance, etc. Although their behavior in a hypnotic or suggestive setting has been looked at extensively, there has been very little research in which they were intensively interviewed to discover how their extremely high responsiveness to suggestions is related to their life histories.

One of the few relevant studies in this area is the important investigation carried out by Josephine Hilgard (1970, 1979). In this project, she conducted individual two-hour interviews with 187 college students to delineate events in their lives that might be related to their hypnotic responsiveness. Each student was also assessed on the Stanford Hypnotic Susceptibility Scale, Form C. Hypnotic susceptibility was found to be related to ability to become involved in an imaginative way in one or more of the following seven areas: reading, dramatic arts, religion, sensory experiences, imagery, imaginary companions (during childhood), and physical and mental adventures. These results were congruent with other lines of investigation that suggested that there is something about the imaginative-fantasy abilities of individuals that is related to their responsiveness to suggestions in hypnotic and non-hypnotic situations (Andersen, 1963; As, 1962; As, O'Hara, & Munger, 1962; Atkinson, 1971; Barber & Glass, 1962;

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In this paper, we present a preliminary report of a long-term research project in which we are conducting extensive in-depth interviews with excellent hypnotic subjects. During the past two and a half years we have been able to find 19 "somnambulistic" hypnotic subjects who respond quickly and profoundly, with or without a hypnotic induction, to the kinds of suggestions that have been traditionally associated with hypnosis—e.g., anesthesia, age regression, visual and auditory hallucinations, blindness, deafness, and other negative hallucinations, amnesia, post-hypnotic behaviors, etc.

The preliminary results of our project confirm Josephine Hilgard's findings. Our superb hypnotic subjects do become involved imaginatively in the seven areas Hilgard delineated and, with some exceptions, they have strong imaginative involvements not just in one or two of the areas but in six or all seven.

However, our most significant and surprising findings are as follows. Not only do our excellent hypnotic subjects become involved imaginatively in reading, drama, etc., but they also have an overriding extreme involvement in fantasizing per se. In fact, they are so involved in fantasy that they could be labeled without exaggeration as "fantasy addicts". Related to their addiction to fantasy is the surprising finding that they are able to "hallucinate" at will. Their fantasy is "hallucinatory" in all sensory modalities; they "see," "hear," "smell," "touch," and fully experience what they fantasize. Their fantasy appears to be as vivid as reality; and they appear to experience what they fantasize in the same way that they experience reality. Their ability to "hallucinate" seems to be related to their extensive practice in fantasizing and also to their surprisingly thorough memory of almost everything they have experienced in their lives.

METHOD

Subjects

As of now, we have completed interviews with 19 excellent hypnotic subjects, all females who have attended or are attending college. One has an M.D. (psychiatrist), one a Ph.D. (psychologist), 11 have B.A.'s or M.A.'s in psychology or counseling, 3 have B.A.'s in other areas, and 3 are college students. Their age range is 21 to 47 with a mean of 33. With one exception, they are either married or have a close relationship with a boyfriend.

As a comparison group, we have also interviewed in the same way 25 unselected female college students and graduates among whom are