

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

EYE MOVEMENT DESENSITIZATION AND REPROCESSING IS NOT HYPNOSIS

To the Editor:

There has been considerable popular debate over the nature and efficacy of the treatment method known as eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), which is based upon the seminal work of Shapiro (1989a, 1989b, 1991). While awaiting publication of a number of studies demonstrating the relative effectiveness of EMDR in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), another question of great importance has developed. It is critical especially for the medico-legal applications of EMDR, and revolves around the differentiation between EMDR and hypnosis. More specifically, the existence of confabulation noted in the recall of hypnotized subjects is generally accepted as sufficient cause for the invalidation of testimony based upon recall obtained during hypnosis. Similar legal arguments have recently been raised concerning the validity of memories recalled during EMDR therapy.

Studies of brain functioning, as measured by electroencephalographs (EEGs) hypnotized subjects, have clearly demonstrated that hypnosis induces an altered state of consciousness differing significantly from the normal waking state. It is characterized by a predominance of increased theta power during hypnosis for both low and high hypnotizable subjects (e.g., Sabourin, Cutcomb, Crawford, & Prebram, 1990). Others have found hemispheric asymmetries in beta wave band activity under hypnosis (DePascalis & Penna, 1990) or a predominance of alpha rhythms (Meares, 1960). These findings appear to differ between high and low hypnotizable subjects, suggesting that the observed changes in alpha and beta wave activity might be related to the differences between experiencing a hypnotic suggestion or failing to do so. The robustness of the observed increase in mean theta power in hypnosis suggests an intensification of intentional processes and imagery enhancement subserving the hyper-suggestibility characteristic of hypnotic trance phenomena and the existence of confabulation noticed in the recall of hypnotized subjects.

In order to examine the effects of EMDR on brain functioning, three subjects' EEGs were examined by 16 channel recordings during both the eye movement and intervening periods of EMDR therapy. The analysis of all epochs for all subjects indicated that the EEGs were within the normal range

of variation and did not differ significantly from those obtained during a normal waking state, other than the electrocardiogram and electrical artifact due to eye movement occurring intermittently during the recordings made during the eye movement portion of the EMDR therapy.

Thus, it appears that EMDR does not produce an altered state of consciousness similar to that which characterizes a hypnotic state. Clearly, EMDR and hypnosis are associated with qualitatively different states of neurophysiological functioning and EMDR does not appear to produce the altered state of consciousness associated with hypnosis and the phenomenon of confabulation. ■

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Editor's Note: This letter draws conclusions from largely uncharacterized data. Its author has been invited to submit a formal article on this subject.