BOOK REVIEW

TIME DISTORTION IN HYPNOSIS: AN EXPERIMENTAL AND CLINICAL INVESTIGATION

By: L.F. Cooper and M.H. Erickson


Reviewed by Peter Naish

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I was delighted to be asked to review this book, as the topic is one of particular interest to me. At the same time I was puzzled, because I had never come across any reference to the work in the literature; the request was the first I had ever heard of such an early investigation of hypnotic time distortion. The earliest normally cited work is by Bowers (1979).

One does not need to read many pages to discover why this book does not feature in the reference sections of recent studies of time distortion. Although the title refers to an experimental investigation, the presentation has little in common with the norms of experimental reporting. The bulk of the book, written by the first author, has an anecdotal feel and, in this reviewer's opinion, reads less like formal science and more like the jottings of an excited enthusiast who wants to dabble with a new idea. It is significant that there are fewer than twenty references, and that a quarter cite the author's original articles, on which the book is based.

So, what produced Linn Cooper's excited enthusiasm? Well, it turns out to be quite intriguing material. These days, hypnotic time distortion is usually associated with the common observation that a subject's retrospective assessment of the duration of a period of hypnosis is generally a gross underestimate (St Jean, 1988). This has been attributed to the slow-running of an internal clock (Naish, 2003). In contrast, Cooper's work is concerned with the speeding-up of subjective time. His subjects were given instruction in achieving this effect, and they were offered the label 'special time' for the experience. They could then be given a suggestion (in hypnosis) such as, 'I am going to give you ten seconds of world time in which to prepare a meal, but in your own special time you will have all the time that is necessary'. Following the brief interval subjects were asked about the imagined experiences during their 'special time'. Typically, one who had been given the meal-making suggestion would describe having fitted in all the procedures associated with preparing a dinner.

An obvious explanation for claims such as the above is that the subject generated the story at the point of being questioned, or recounted an actual event that they could remember. Perhaps the imagination phase simply comprised unexpanded 'headlines', such as 'prepare vegetables'. Cooper was of the opinion that subjects were reporting what
they believed to be actual experiences, and even subjected some to a polygraph ‘lie detector’ in support of the claim. However, subjects were unable to perform faster-than-normal mental arithmetic during their telescoped time periods. A mathematician tested in this way described the calculations as being difficult, because they ‘lacked continuity’ and comprised ‘disconnected points’. This experience would appear to lend support to the headline hypothesis.

Towards the end of the book is a section by Erickson, discussing the use of the accelerated time technique in the therapeutic context. This largely comprises case histories, written in typical Ericksonian style. An example is of a musician who had difficulty in making time for practice. Allegedly, he was instructed in the use of special time, into which he could squeeze long periods of rehearsal. The outcome, we are told, is that his performance improved beyond recognition. One wonders whether the headline phenomenon was taking place, perhaps with the result that he played one note per bar, or one bar per page. The result would certainly be beyond recognition! To be serious, Cooper also describes a case of this sort, where the subject’s spouse, also a musician, apparently attested to the resulting improvements.

The book concludes with a few more pages by Erickson, added at the time of the second edition. They refer to the more common experience of time distortion: i.e. retrospectively, very little time appears to have passed.

For my taste, this book is over-wordy and insufficiently critical. Nevertheless, the effects described are certainly intriguing, and deserve rigorous investigation. This is probably not a book for anyone other than a researcher considering conducting such an investigation, or a therapist who is particularly desperate for a source of new ideas.

References

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