

# Impact of reading a scientific journal issue about hypnosis on the beliefs and attitudes towards hypnosis among psychologists

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**ABSTRACT:** The goal of this study was to examine the influence of receiving scientific information about hypnosis over Spanish psychologists' beliefs and attitudes toward hypnosis. The Valencia Scale on Attitudes and Beliefs toward Hypnosis-Therapist (VSABH-T) was administered to 2434 Spanish psychologists. A retest and a second retest were carried out, and between these testing administrations a monograph issue focused on hypnosis was published in a journal that all members of the Spanish Psychological Association received. Results indicated that psychologists who read this monograph, in general terms, changed their misconceptions about hypnosis for correct beliefs and their negative attitudes toward hypnosis for positive ones. Moreover, the VSABH-T was useful for detecting changes in psychologists' beliefs and attitudes toward hypnosis.

**Key words:** hypnosis, attitudes, psychologists.

**RESUMEN:** El objetivo de este estudio es conocer la influencia de adquirir información científica referida a la hipnosis sobre las creencias y actitudes hacia la misma de los psicólogos colegiados españoles. Para ello se aplicó la Escala de Valencia de Actitudes y Creencias hacia la Hipnosis-Terapeuta (EVACH-T) a una muestra de 2434 colegiados en dos ocasiones, y una tercera más, ésta última tras publicarse un monográfico sobre hipnosis en la revista Papeles del Psicólogo, recibida por todos los colegiados. Los resultados indicaron que aquellos psicólogos que leyeron dicho monográfico cambiaron, en general, sus creencias erróneas por otras más ajustadas, y sus actitudes negativas por otras más positivas hacia la hipnosis. Asimismo, la EVACH-T es sensible a los cambios en las actitudes y creencias de los psicólogos hacia la hipnosis.

**Palabras clave:** hipnosis, actitudes, colegiados.

A great deal of research demonstrates that hypnosis is an efficacious technique when used as an adjunct to other therapeutic interventions for the treatment of a number of medical disorders and conditions (Lynn, Kirsch, Barabasz, Cardeña, & Patterson, 2000; Montgomery & Schnur, 2005). Thus, it is essential that health professionals are knowledgeable about the advantages and limitations of hypnosis, so that they are able to inform those clients who can benefit from it and to facilitate their access to interventions

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adding hypnosis. Moreover, taking into account that both holding misconceptions or myths about hypnosis and using this technique on the basis of such misconceptions may lead to an iatrogenic use of hypnosis (Capafons, 1998), it is important that professionals' knowledge about hypnosis is based on the current empirical research.

Attitudes toward hypnosis have been studied from different perspectives. First, there is research focused on their relationship with other constructs such as absorption and suggestibility (Spanos Brett, Menary, & Cross, 1987; Spanos & McPeake, 1975). Second, other studies have developed and validated instruments for assessing attitudes toward hypnosis in different populations (general public, patients, students, and health professionals) (Barling & De Lucchi, 2004; Capafons, Espejo, & Cabañas, 2005; Chaves, 2004; Johnson & Hauck (1999) McConkey & Jupp (1985-86; Yu, 2004b) and the sources of information where these attitudes were generated (Gow et al., 2006; Yu, 2006). Finally, there is another stream of studies focusing on the changes in attitudes after having experienced hypnosis or receiving different types of information about it (Capafons, Cabañas, et al., 2005; Capafons, Selma, et al., 2006; Green, 2003; McConkey, 1986; Molina & Mendoza, 2006).

The present study is framed in the latter perspective, and its objective is to understand the influence that receiving new information about hypnosis has over Spanish psychologists' beliefs and attitudes toward this technique and field of study. According to the literature, both exposure to new information about an attitudinal object and having direct experiences with it, can help change the initial attitude toward the object into a more adequate one (Stroebe & Jonas, 1990). In this way, findings in hypnosis research have indicated that receiving new scientific knowledge about hypnosis has an influence over the change of misconceptions into realistic beliefs, as well as the change of negative attitudes into positive ones (Capafons, Cabañas, et al., 2005; Capafons, Selma, et al., 2006; Green, 2003; Koizumi, 2001; McConkey, 1986; Molina & Mendoza, 2006; Thomson, 2003).

Therefore, it is expected that those psychologists with more knowledge about hypnosis and/or experience with it, as well as those who have received new information either on their own or through reading a monograph about hypnosis published by the Spanish Psychological Association (*Papeles del Psicólogo*, Vol. 25, No 89), will show more positive attitudes toward hypnosis and will hold adequate beliefs about it.

## METHOD

### *Procedure*

The Valencia Scale of Beliefs and Attitudes toward Hypnosis –Therapist (VSBAH-T) and a letter asking for collaboration was sent along with the July-September (2004) issue of the journal *Papeles del Psicólogo* to all Spanish psychologists affiliated with the Spanish Psychological Association (nearly 44,000). Given that there was a response of 254 psychologists, the scale along with another letter were sent to 20,000 psychologists members of the same association selected randomly, obtaining a response of 600. Finally, another 10,000 psychologists were randomly selected, who received the scale along

with a letter similar to the previous one but emphasizing that one of the objectives of this research is to combat the unauthorized practice of hypnosis by a person without the proper qualifications. A response of 1,580 psychologists was obtained. Thus, the total sample for the test consisted of 2,434 participants.

Participants who responded to the scale for the first time, were retested one month afterward. The retest version of the scale included an item asking whether participants had had access to new information about hypnosis since the first time they had completed the scale. The aim of this question was to determine whether the differences in beliefs and attitudes toward hypnosis could be attributed to the new information acquired between the test and the retest.

A second retest was carried out by sending the scale and another letter to those participants who had responded to the retest. In this version, the scale included a question about whether participants had read the mentioned monograph about hypnosis and if so, which articles were read. The goal of analyzing the responses to this question was to examine the impact of the exposure to information about hypnosis.

### Sample

The sample consisted of 2,434 psychologists who were members of the Spanish Psychological Association for the test, 1,207 for the retest, and 217 for the second retest. The characteristics of the sample are described in Table 1. Participation in the study was voluntary and did not include any type of compensation.

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample.

		% Sample Test (N = 2434)	% Sample Retest (N = 1207)	% Sample 2 <sup>nd</sup> Retest (N = 217)
Gender	Male	25.4	25.8	29.0
	Female	74.6	74.2	71.0
Having been hypnotized		22.9	23.2	25.4
Having knowledge about hypnosis		63.8	65.1	74.0
Training of participants who have knowledge about hypnosis: N test = 1550 N retest = 785 N 2 <sup>nd</sup> retest = 159 Multiple choice response	University	49.4	50.7	39.6
	Courses	34.3	32.9	28.3
	Master	18.2	19.2	15.7
	Scientific Journals	32.0	25.2	62.3
	Television	12.4	18.5	11.3
	Other readings	32.6	26.9	21.4
	Other sources	11.0	12.9	10.7
Using hypnosis		10.3	9.7	10.7
Practical training about hypnosis		30.9	31.3	33.2
Postgraduate courses on hypnosis		1.2	1.2	1.8
Knowledge of active-alert hypnosis		8.1	9.7	12.0
Knowledge of waking hypnosis		6.3	6.7	6.3
Access to new information about hypnosis since last time the participant responded the scale		N/A	9.4	67.1
Interest in receiving information about hypnosis in test and/or retest		85.5	87.9	85.7
Interest in receiving practical training in hypnosis		83.6	84.8	84.0

### *Instruments*

VSBAH-T. The VSBAH-T was used to assess participants' beliefs and attitudes toward hypnosis. This scale is a variation of the Valencia Scale of Beliefs and Attitudes toward Hypnosis-Client (VSBAH-C; Capafons, Alarcón, Cabañas, & Espejo, 2003; Capafons, Cabañas, Espejo, & Cardeña, 2004). It differs in the response format and in that the wording of some items was adapted to psychotherapists' point of view.

The VSBAH-T consists of 37 items scored on a 6 point Likert-type response scale that ranges from 1-“strongly disagree” to 6-“strongly agree”. These items refer to the seven misconceptions proposed by Capafons (1998), and are also based on other questionnaires (Eimer & Freeman, 1998; Keller, 1996; McConkey, 1986; McConkey & Jupp, 1985/86; Spanos et al., 1987)

The confirmatory factor analysis performed on this scale (Capafons, Espejo, & Mendoza, 2008) revealed statistical confirmation for the 8-factor model solution obtained in the previous exploratory factor analysis (Capafons, Morales, et al., 2006). Factors obtained were the following: FEAR whose content is associated with being afraid of losing control while hypnotized, of being under the control of the hypnotist, of becoming trapped in a hypnotic trance and not being able to “come out” of it; MEMORY that indicates the belief that hypnotized people are in a trance state that allows them to have access to memories of past events that otherwise they would not remember. It also refers to the description of hypnosis as a means of forcing people to tell the truth about everything they would normally lie about; HELP that describes hypnosis as a helpful technique to obtain therapeutic outcomes; CONTROL that indicates that hypnotized people control their acts and that hypnotic responses are voluntary; COLLABORATION whose content refers to the need for collaboration between the hypnotist and the hypnotized person to achieve hypnotic responses; INTEREST that concerns the interest and pleasure that somebody shows for hypnosis or for being hypnotized; MAGICAL that describes hypnosis as a magical solution to overcome problems, effortlessly and without regarding other necessary factors for changing; and MARGINAL whose content includes the beliefs that hypnosis is beyond the scope of scientific research, and that the hypnotized person has some characteristics that are not normal.

All factors correlated significantly with one another, except for Magic with Help. The internal consistency was estimated through confirmatory methodology and was shown to be superior to .80 for all factors. Test-retest reliability was also adequate (Capafons et al., 2008).

Moreover, the scale contains a questionnaire developed to obtain information about the participants. It consists of several demographic questions as well as questions related to their knowledge and experience with hypnosis. As mentioned before, in the retest and in the second retest some questions were added relative to whether the professional had acquired new information about hypnosis, and whether they had read the monograph.

### *Analyses*

In order to determine whether there were significant differences between the retest and the second retest in the scores of those professionals with more irrational ideas in each factor, participants who showed the highest and the lowest scores in the scale in the test were selected. Thereafter, hypothesis tests were conducted, namely, Student's t-tests for related groups, except for those cases with a low number of participants in which Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were conducted.

Likewise, to test for differences in the second retest for each factor, three analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were performed with the second retest scores as the dependent variable and the following independent variables: "having read the monograph ("yes", "no", and "having read the monographic plus other information"), "having read the entire monograph" ("yes", "no", and "having read the entire monographic plus other information"), and "number of articles read of the monograph ("one", "two", "three", and "five" articles), and the level for each factor in the retest as the covariate. Participants who read four articles were not taken into account because of their low number.

Next, three mixed analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to study the interaction between each independent variable related to reading the monograph and the time ("retest" and "second retest"). In the analyses with significant interaction, an ANOVA was performed for each level of the interaction to test for significant differences in each level. Also, Tukey's *post-hoc* test was used.

Finally, to examine the characteristics of the psychologists who changed their beliefs and attitudes toward hypnosis after reading the monograph (second retest), the total score on the factor in which there were significant differences was calculated and the following groups were created (two of participants who changed and two of those who did not change): participants who changed to a higher score in the factor; participants who changed to a lower score in the factor; participants who continue with a low score in the factor; and participants who continue with a high score in the factor. It was used the clinical criterion of considering these groups depending on the mean score in the scale for the factor, namely, 3.5. Thereafter, participants who responded to the second retest were selected depending on whether they had read only the monograph, they had not read it, they had read the monograph plus other information, they had read the entire monograph, and they had read one, two, three or five articles of the monograph. Finally, the characteristics were analyzed depending on whether the professionals had changed their score in the factor and in what sense, taking into account the four groups mentioned above.

## RESULTS

In the analyses of changes of participants who showed extreme scores in the factors of the scale, results indicated that there were changes in their beliefs from agreeing to disagreeing in the following factors:

*Fear*: after reading the monograph, participants considered hypnosis as a safe

technique in which the person keeps control over his/her behavior, in contrast with their belief in the retest that hypnosis is a dangerous technique that scares them (Table 2).

*Memory:* participants changed their beliefs by no longer considering hypnosis as a valid technique to remember forgotten events from the past or to force to tell the truth against the person's will. Likewise, the beliefs that hypnosis is a trance state and that such trance is necessary to achieving the goals of the intervention changed into the opposite (Table 2).

*Control:* participants changed to believe that hypnotized people keep control over themselves and their will to do what they wish, and that they are who cause the responses to suggestions (Table 3).

Table 2. Differences between participants with high and low scores in Fear, Memory, and Collaboration factors: Wilcoxon signed-rank test..

	N	Retest		2 <sup>nd</sup> Retest		Z	
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Z(a)	p-value (two-sided)
FEAR	5	4.280	0.303	2.633	1.076	-2.023	0.043
MEMORY	17	4.600	0.579	2.953	1.041	-3.625	<0.001
COLLABORACIÓN	13	3.359	0.346	4.436	0.843	-3.052	0.002

Moreover, participants changed in the second retest from disagreeing to agreeing in the following factors:

*Help:* participants who did not consider hypnosis as an adjunct technique that facilitates therapeutic results changed to perceive it as a useful technique to improve the impact of the treatments to which it is added (Table 3).

*Collaboration:* there is a change in considering that hypnosis requires a person's effort and cooperation, whereas in the retest participants disagreed with this idea (Table 2).

Relative to the *Interest* factor, even though the mean difference was significant, there was no change from disagreeing to agreeing with the items of the factor. Thus, participants showed more interest in being hypnotized but without changing to agree with the contents of the factor (Table 3).

Table 3. Differences between participants with high and low scores in Help, Control, and Interest: t-tests.

	N	Retest		2 <sup>o</sup> Retest		Z		
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	df	p-value (two-sided)
HELP	63	3.390	0.526	3.766	0.549	-5.416	62	<0.001
CONTROL	98	3.255	0.470	3.869	0.675	-8.479	97	<0.001
INTERÉS	107	3.072	0.726	3.355	0.953	-3.841	106	<0.001

The ANCOVAs results did not show statistically significant differences in any factor, and ANOVAs showed only significant interactions for Memory factor.

In the variable “*having read the monograph*” ( $F=5.87$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), significant differences were found both in the retest ( $F=3.72$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and in the second retest ( $F=5.62$ ,  $p<0.005$ ). Results of the *post-hoc* tests indicated that in the second retest participants who subsequently read the monograph and participants who read the monograph plus other information showed significantly lower scores than participants who did not read the monograph.

There were significant differences in the variable “*having read the entire monograph*” ( $F=3.18$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) but only in the second retest ( $F=8.69$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ). According to the results of the *post-hoc* tests, those professionals who read the entire monograph, as well as those who read the entire monograph plus other information showed significantly lower scores than those who did not read the entire monograph.

Finally, relative to the variable “*number of articles read*” ( $F=3.45$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), significant differences were found only in the second retest ( $F=4.36$ ,  $p<0.005$ ). The *post-hoc* tests results indicated that there were significant differences between participants who read two articles and who read five, with the highest scores for the former.

Overall, results indicated that participants who showed irrational beliefs in the retest changed in the second retest to hold more adequate beliefs about hypnosis and to show a more positive attitude toward it. Even though we cannot assure that this effect has been exclusively caused by having read the monograph, data suggest that there has been a positive influence of receiving this scientific information.

With regard to the analyses of the descriptive characteristics of those professionals who changed their beliefs and attitudes toward hypnosis after reading the monograph, we will comment on those results for the analyses with a sufficient number of participants to obtain percentages that convey relevant information.

In Table 4 characteristics of those participants who *only read the monograph* and changed in the Memory factor ( $N = 46$ ) are shown.

For the variable “*having studied for a Masters degree after their Psychology graduate degree*”, 65.2% of participants who had studied for a Masters degree and had read the monograph kept their score low on the Memory factor in the second retest, whereas only 32.6% of participants who had not studied for a Masters degree kept their score low in this factor. Furthermore, 8.7% of participants who had not studied for a Masters degree changed to a higher score in the Memory factor, and 4.3% kept a high score in this factor. Therefore, among those participants that only read the monograph and changed in the Memory factor, it was found that those who had studied for a Masters degree after their Psychology graduate degree changed to have more rational beliefs about the contents of the items of the Memory factor than those who had not studied for a Masters degree.

In Table 5 the characteristics of those participants who read the monograph plus other information and changed in the Memory factor ( $N = 12$ ) are shown.

Regarding the variable “*having received practical training about hypnosis in the test and/or the retest*”, 100% of those participants who received such training kept their

scores low in the Memory factor, whereas only 40% of participants who did not receive practical information kept low scores in this factor. Therefore, after reading the monograph plus other information about hypnosis, 100% of participants who had practical training in hypnosis changed their misconceptions relative to Memory factor to correct beliefs, compared to 60% of participants that did not have such training. Additionally, it is striking that 40% of participants that did not have practical training kept high scores in the Memory factor.

Table 4. Characteristics of participants who only read the monograph and changed in Memory factor (percentages).

Participants' characteristics	Changes in the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Retest in Memory factor			
	Percentage of participants that changed to a higher score	Percentage of participants that changed to a lower score	Percentage of participants that continued scoring low in the factor	Percentage of participants that continued scoring high in the factor
Having a Master besides their Psychology graduate degree	0	26.1	65.2	8.7
Not having a Master additional to their graduate degree	8.7	21.7	32.6	4.3

Relative to the variables “*using hypnosis in the test and/or the retest*”, and “*using hypnosis in the second retest*”, 100% of participants who use hypnosis kept low scores in the Memory factor. Among professionals who do not use hypnosis, 28.6% kept high scores in this factor, whereas 71.4% of participants either kept low scores (57.1%) or changed to lower scores in this factor (14.3%). Thus, professionals who use hypnosis held more adequate beliefs than those who do not use it, although a high percentage of the latter changed to correct beliefs after reading the monograph plus other information.

Finally, for the following variables the percentages are the same and therefore they will be explained together: “*having knowledge about active-alert hypnosis in the test and/or in the retest*”, “*having knowledge about active-alert hypnosis in the second retest*”, “*having knowledge of waking hypnosis in the test and/or in the retest*”, and “*having knowledge of waking hypnosis in the second retest*”. All participants (100%) who reported to have knowledge about active-alert hypnosis and/or waking hypnosis kept their scores low in the Memory factor. Among those participants who did not have knowledge about these techniques (66.6% of the total), 62.5% kept low scores in the Memory factor, 12.5% showed lower scores in this factor, and 25% changed to higher scores in the Memory factor. Therefore, a high percentage of participants who did not have knowledge about these techniques (75%) changed to more adequate beliefs in the Memory factor, and the total of those who had knowledge of these techniques confirmed their adequate beliefs in this factor after reading the monograph.

In Table 6 the characteristics of participants who read five articles of the monograph and changed in the Memory factor (N = 39) are shown.

Relative to the variable “*having knowledge about hypnosis in the test and/or the*

retest", 81.6% of participants who had knowledge kept low scores in the Memory factor compared with 50% of those who did not have knowledge about hypnosis. In contrast, 33.3% of participants who did not have knowledge about hypnosis changed to lower scores in the Memory factor after reading the monograph. Therefore, reading the monograph kept the correct beliefs of those participants who had knowledge of hypnosis and of many who did not have such knowledge, and influenced the change of those participants who did not have knowledge about hypnosis and held misconceptions about the contents of the Memory factor.

Table 5. Characteristics of those participants who read the monograph plus other information and changed in Memory factor (percentages).

N = 12		Changes in the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Retest in Memory factor		
Participants' characteristics		Percentage of participants that changed to a lower score	Percentage of participants that continued scoring low in the factor	Percentage of participants that continue scoring high in the factor
Having received practical information about hypnosis in the test and/or the retest	Yes	0	100	0
	No	20	40	20
Using hypnosis in the test, and/or the retest and the 2 <sup>nd</sup> retest	Yes	0	100	0
	No	14.3	57.1	28.6
Having knowledge of active-alert hypnosis and/or waking hypnosis in the test, and/or the retest, and/or the 2 <sup>nd</sup> retest	Yes	0	100	0
	No	12.5	62.5	25.0

Table 6. Characteristics of those participants who read 5 articles of the monograph and changed in Memory factor (percentages).

N = 39		Changes in the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Retest in Memory factor			
Participants' characteristics		Percentage of participants that changed to a higher score	Percentage of participants that changed to a lower score	Percentage of participants that continued scoring low in the factor	Percentage of participants that continued scoring high in the factor
Having knowledge of hypnosis in the test and/or in the retest	Yes	0	7.4	81.5	11.1
	No	8.3	33.3	50	8.3
Using hypnosis in the test and/or in the retest and in the 2 <sup>nd</sup> retest	Yes	0	0	100	0
	No	3.1	18.8	65.6	12.5
Having knowledge of active-alert hypnosis and/or waking hypnosis in the test and/or the retest	Yes	0	0	100	0
	No	2.9	17.6	67.6	11.8

Regarding the variables “*using hypnosis in the test and/or the retest*”, “*using hypnosis in the second retest*”, “*having knowledge of active-alert hypnosis in the test and/or the retest*”, and “*having knowledge of waking hypnosis*”, 100% of participants who used hypnosis and knew about active-alert hypnosis and waking hypnosis kept their correct beliefs about hypnosis; more than 65% of those who did not use hypnosis or know about active-alert or waking hypnosis also kept their low scores in the Memory factor; and more than 17% of participants who did not use hypnosis or know about active-alert or waking hypnosis changed to lower scores in this factor after reading the monograph.

The rest of analyzed variables did not show significant differences among the participants who responded in different ways.

## DISCUSSION

Overall, the results confirm our expectation that participants who read the monograph about hypnosis -a scientific source of information- would change their misconceptions to rational beliefs and their negative attitudes to positive ones.

By and large, the results indicate that the more information, the more change, since both participants who read the monograph and who acquired information from other sources during the time between the retest and the second retest showed more rational beliefs and more positive attitudes. Moreover, those professionals who have more knowledge, experience, and interest in hypnosis showed more adequate beliefs *a priori* and, after reading the monograph, either confirmed their rational beliefs or corrected their misconceptions. These findings are consistent with those reported in similar research studies (Capafons, Cabañas, et al., 2005; Capafons, Selma, et al., 2006; Green, 2003; McConkey, 1986; Molina & Mendoza, 2006; Thomson, 2003).

Additionally, results point out that the VSBAH-T is a useful instrument to detect attitudes and beliefs about hypnosis that may have an influence on professionals' decision making in rejecting the use of hypnosis in cases where it could benefit their clients. Likewise, the scale helps identify beliefs about hypnosis that may determine its iatrogenic use, especially regarding the genesis of false memories.

This study presents several limitations. First, participants had few misconceptions about hypnosis and reported to be interested in learning more about this topic. In fact, over half of them had scientific training in hypnosis in the first test administration. Second, given that this is not an experimental study, it can not be assumed that changes in beliefs and attitudes toward hypnosis are exclusively due to reading the monograph. However, data suggest that there has been a positive influence of receiving new scientific information. Another limitation is the small sample size, although it is about 5.5% of the tested population which is the expected percentage of responses in this kind of studies.

Finally, according to the results of this study as well as findings of previous

research indicating that having knowledge supported by empirical research about hypnosis and experiencing hypnosis lead to hold adequate beliefs and positive attitudes toward hypnosis, it would be useful to include training in both theoretical and practical hypnosis in universities to help disseminate the scientific knowledge of hypnosis.

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