

## **The Influence of Irving Kirsch's Hypnosis Research Contributions on Psychotherapy<sup>1</sup>**

Key Words: hypnosis, Kirsch, psychotherapy

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<sup>1</sup> Invited article for a special issue in honor of I. Kirsch not published in the American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis, Volume 65, 2023 - [Issue 3](#), due to important discrepancies between the Editor-in-Chief and the reviewers he selected and the authors of the text. The manuscript was previously reviewed and accepted by Irving Kirsch himself, who authorized its dissemination.

## Abstract

It is difficult to define and quantify an author's influence on psychotherapy in general, and perhaps it is not even possible to do it rigorously taking into account the different, even antagonist, perspectives included inside the generic term of Psychotherapy. To do a qualitative analysis of the advances that an author has contributed to the Psychotherapy is not an easy task either, and there may not have been enough time to see such an influence arise yet, especially when the author is actively working. Therefore, this article will be based on the authors' opinions regarding the impact that Irving Kirsch's work in the field of hypnosis could have on a more efficacious, efficient, innovative, integrative, and ethic use of Psychotherapy. The main topics of this article will be the influence of Kirsch's work on: (1) the research about the efficacy and the processes of change of the Psychotherapy and hypnosis; (2) how to use hypnosis in the Psychotherapy and the integration of different perspectives; (3) how to foster common aspects of the psychotherapy, such as therapeutic alliance and relationship, *rapport*, motivation, expectancies, etc.; (4) how to avoid risks associated to certain malpractices of hypnosis within psychotherapy; and (5) the ethical use of hypnosis for the users' benefit.

The first author of this article met Irving Kirsch in person for the first time in 1993, when he invited him to participate in a congress about hypnosis in Valencia (Spain) Spain. During an informal conversation with him, A mentioned the importance of distinguishing between the term unconscious as an *adjective* (i.e., unconscious processes) and unconscious as a *noun* (i.e., unconscious-subconscious, or even different types of unconscious, according to the perspectives of different authors such as Freud, Jung, Perls, etc.). A explained to Kirsch that the use of unconscious as a noun by psychoanalytic, Ericksonian, and even Gestalt psychotherapy approaches was aimed to account for intrapsychic conflicts and discover the origin of a psychopathology.

This definition of unconscious as a noun -reiterated Capafons- implies acceptance of the existence of a psychologic subworld with executive ability, similar to what it could be called the “demonological model of the abnormal behavior” (Bernstein & Nietzel, 1980), in which each person would be possessed by a sort of entity or spirit (the unconscious) that would govern part of their behavior, if not all. Capafons described for a while the consequences for clinical practice of using this concept, the empirical limitations about the validity of the construct called the unconscious, and so on. Kirsch nodded showing interest in the topic as well as agreement. Capafons, a young and inexperienced researcher at that time, had a dream that same night in which some white clouds transformed into a bibliographic reference: Kirsch and Winter, 1983. Suddenly he realized that both authors named Kirsch were the same person. He searched in his library a book by Walker (1983) and, to his great surprise, he found out that the topic of the first chapter of the book was the History of Clinical Psychology, and the contents explained exactly the same ideas he had been discussing with Kirsch about the similarity of the unconscious

concept, especially the Freudian one, with the demonological models. Capafons then realized that he had experienced source amnesia or cryptomnesia (not suggested amnesia).

Thus, in the next conversation he had with Professor Kirsch, right before the beginning of the congress, he told him: “Yesterday I was talking to you about your own theory of the unconsciousness, is that right?” Kirsch nodded with a smile. Capafons, embarrassed, apologized to him and told him that he was amazed by the silence and active listening that Kirsch showed in the whole conversation about the unconsciousness, without mentioning that he was the author of that thesis. He replied: “It was amusing to hear how you brilliantly explained my theory.” This anecdote summarizes what the authors of this paper think about the influence of Kirsch’s work on psychotherapy by fostering: active listening, empathy, establishment of rapport and alliance, and, in this case, friendship, that can be extensive to the therapeutic alliance, clarification of concepts, and immediate applications to everyday life. But above all, he has the humility to give the other person the leading role, so that their own resources help them to change through self-knowledge. In Capafons’s case, his mind showed him through a dream where he had to look for the origin of this theory, and he acknowledged that, even though it was not his own, he was able to disseminate it among his students and patients.

Therefore, Kirsch had already had an influence in psychotherapy in general, not only from the hypnosis field, but by writing about the history of clinical psychology as well (Kirsch & Winter, 1993), and by his understanding of hypnosis from the perspectives of expectancy and social learning theories (Kirsch, 1990). One of the ways Kirsch had an influence on psychotherapy is his research about the efficacy of psychotherapy and hypnosis, as well as his emphasis on researching the processes that account for the therapeutic change. Hart (1997) indicates in his review of Kirsch’s book (1990), *Changing Expectation: A Key to Effective Psychotherapy*: “This may well

be one of the most useful books on psychotherapy you ever read” (p. 95). Indeed, as Hart pointed out, when reading this book one can see that Kirsch wanted to show how all psychotherapists can become more effective by enhancing expectancies in an ethical and sensible way. Kirsch appealed to the common principles of the psychotherapies when they were not in fashion yet. Following the steps of Frank (1985) and Korchin & Sands (1983), he (1985) emphasized the relevance of the expectancies and the restoration of faith in general, but specifically of the expectancies that he called response expectancies. This theory not only has had an influence in the field of hypnosis, but also may be considered a common principle shared by all psychotherapies. Kirsch’s contribution regarding these authors’ hypotheses was to refer to the response expectancies.

In fact, in 1990 Kirsch provided specific ways on how to engage clients/patients in therapy, or how to end treatment in a manner that will inculcate a sense of mastery in them, that is, how to foster both the rapport and the therapeutic alliance, another of the common principles advocated by Korchin and Sands (1983). In the same book, Kirsch also emphasized the relevance of combining the practice of psychotherapy with the experimental research on variables, in this case, response expectancies, as well as their contribution to the research on placebo and hypnosis. In addition, Kirsch indicated accurately how to change the expectancies and use them in the psychotherapeutic setting, and he also investigated its relevance and effects empirically. In this way, he had already provided research about the change processes in 1990. This is an essential aspect framed in Kirsch’s persistence throughout his work to defend the importance of joining together basic research and practice of clinical psychology and psychotherapy to explain therapeutic change. In fact, the great importance Kirsch confers on expectancies can be found in the book he edited entitled *How Expectancies Shape the Experience* (1999). In it, he provides information about the expectancies and different psychological and medical dysfunctions,

substance abuse, and even placebo and other nonspecific effects (common factors in psychotherapy). There is, of course, a full chapter devoted specifically to hypnosis (Council, 1999).

One of the first and most influential meta-analyses about the efficacy of hypnosis was published by Kirsch, Montgomery, and Sapirstein in 1995. This article demonstrated that hypnosis as an adjunct to cognitive-behavioral treatments substantially increased their efficacy. Certainly, there had been other metanalyses published before (e.g., Smith, Glass, & Miller, 1980), but they referred to the use of hypnosis within psychodynamic treatments, and although they were not as methodologically solid, they already showed the benefits of hypnosis as an adjunct. Kirsch not only focused on connecting basic research with the creation of procedures based on it, but also on providing recommendations for the use of hypnosis to avoid unnecessary risks. As a co-editor of several books along with authors like Lynn, Rhue, Cardeña-Buelna, or Capafons, Kirsch has included chapters with information on: (1) how hypnosis should be used; (2) preventive steps clinicians can follow to avoid unwanted effects; and (3) preparing users to facilitate their success and reduce any side effects or iatrogenic effects. Kirsch also considers important rigorous scientific research, and this is reflected in another book (Lynn & Kirsch, 2006). Its title illustrates specifically Kirsch's insistence in clinical practice that includes the experimental and applied evidence available about hypnosis: *Essentials of Clinical Hypnosis. An Evidence-Based Approach*.

The contents of those chapters help therapists decide the most appropriate use of hypnosis to reduce to the minimum any risks, especially those related to false memories and memory distortions. Chapters like the one by Kirsch, Lynn, and Rhue (1993) already described these preventive steps, indicating contraindications in the use of hypnosis and ways to avoid adverse reactions. In the same way, we find chapters that elaborate on the information about the aspects

mentioned before, such as Lynn, Kirsch, and Rhue (1996; 2010a) or Lynn, Kirsch, Neufeld, and Rhue (1996). All these chapters describe procedures to optimize hypnosis outcomes while avoiding its possible risks.

Additionally, they outline recommended criteria for deciding whether it is appropriate or not to add hypnosis in the treatment of a particular patient. In this book we can find definitions (as in most of the above-mentioned books), theories and research about hypnosis, methods of induction and suggestions, as well as specific procedures to connect therapeutic strategies with hypnotic suggestions. It is worth mentioning the directions included on how to use hypnotic regressions to help patient change, instead of jeopardizing the resolutions of the patient's problem. Additionally, both authors provide clinical strategies for different types of problems, such as obesity, pain, and smoking cessation, as well as their supporting evidence. Moreover, in this book, the application of hypnosis is linked to specific problems, to scientific theories about hypnosis, and to the available experimental research and the studies about hypnosis applications. There are also discussions about controversial topics of the hypnosis field such as: trance, dissociation, alteration of consciousness, why hypnosis works, when hypnotic suggestions work, and so on.

In sum, Kirsch, when writing as sole or co-author, has always aimed to dignify experimental and clinical hypnosis by keeping it within the scientific research field. He has connected the academic world with the applied field through scientific, a very important contribution to psychotherapy. In this way, he follows the traditions held by the Behavioral Therapies, the Cognitive-Behavioral Treatments, and some psychodynamic and humanist approaches. This tradition was started and disseminated in 1952 by Hans H. Eysenck, who conducted research in the field of hypnosis as well (Eysenck, 1989). Eysenck's seminal article (Eysenck, 1952) stated that there was no evidence that the psychotherapies of the time provided

any benefits. This generated a controversy that greatly promoted the development of research in psychotherapy.

Kirsch followed that tradition and has collaborated with authors such as Barber, Chaves, Coe, Gorassini, Green, Lynn, Montgomery, Rhue, Sarbin, and Spanos. Their main goal has been and still is (for those who are still among us) to keep the clinical and experimental hypnosis within the field of science, giving credibility to the study of hypnosis. This topic is particularly important at a time in the history of hypnosis in which it seems difficult to publish studies about hypnosis in high impact journals. Moreover, the most important journals specialized in hypnosis remain in intermediate positions in the rankings of the databases. In some countries, like España, certain types of hypnosis are even considered as pseudoscience and pseudo-therapy by the Spanish Government (2022), because they do not provide methodologically solid evidence of its efficacy as a sole intervention. Even though this is a preliminary report, this consideration implies that hypnosis should not be used in the national health system (which includes the public and private sanitary professional setting). Theoretical approaches lacking experimental support make difficult the acceptance of hypnosis as a study topic able to obtain funding for research. Likewise, scientific journals seem reticent to publish articles whose main topic is hypnosis. This consideration of certain types of hypnosis as pseudo-therapy and pseudoscience ends up extending to all kinds of hypnosis in one way or another. This halo effect generates distrust in colleagues from universities and scientific-professional associations when trying to initiate work relationships to study hypnosis. Therefore, the tradition of fostering basic and applied research of psychotherapies may be Kirsch and colleagues' most important contribution.

Relevant authors from Kirsch's research team at the University of Connecticut have continued with the tradition of connecting the academic to the applied world. These authors, in

turn, have worked with other research groups, which has allowed to maintain rigorous research about hypnosis, specifically in the cognitive-behavioral approach of hypnosis (Kirsch, Capafons, Cardeña-Buelna, 1999a,b; Spanos & Chaves, 1989), subsequently called the social cognitive perspective (Lynn, Kirsch, & Hallquist, 2008). The books and articles we have mentioned are proof of it, although specifically in the books and manuals is where this interest is more noticeable. It is not a sectarian interest, but integrative. Lynn et al. (2008) noted the heterogeneity of social cognitive approaches, and the difficulty of placing some authors as followers of one or another. However, when reviewing the books edited by Kirsch and his colleagues and some of his seminal articles, we can observe two characteristics: Kirsch is in a social cognitive position and from that perspective, he integrates the use of hypnosis as an adjunct to cognitive-behavioral therapies (Kirsch, 1993; Kirsch, & Coe, 1996; Lynn, & Kirsch, 2006; Schoenberger, Kirsch, Gearan, Montgomery, & Pastyrnak, 1997).

In subsequent books we will mention below, Kirsch integrates procedures originated from the social cognitive theories of hypnosis and their experimental research, such as the Valencia Model of Waking Hypnosis (Capafons & Mendoza 2010). This model is inspired by the clinical procedures of the Cognitive-Behavioral Therapies as well, providing procedures that foster an efficient and flexible use of hypnosis. These procedures are integrated into what was referred to as coping skills in the Cognitive-Behavioral approach (Goldfried & Trier, 1974), designed to be used in individuals' everyday life, to increase their self-control and self-regulation. Kirsch fostered the dissemination of this model, as well as the one called Self-Regulation Therapy (Amigó, 1999; Capafons, 1999) a variation of waking hypnosis, and aimed to integrate innovations in the procedures associated to hypnosis from a social cognitive perspective and based especially in his theory of response expectancies. However, he was not limited to the models close to his postulates;

he also aimed, and still aims, to integrate hypnosis with other theoretical approaches, either from the hypnosis field or from clinical practice. A review of the table of contents and the contents of the books he has co-edited shows his interest in acknowledging that most clinicians use an eclectic hypnotherapy in which hypnosis is understood as an adjunct to medical or psychological treatments (Lynn, Kirsch, & Rhue, 2010a). In fact, in the *Casebook of Clinical Hypnosis*, he and his co-editors included chapters by authors such as A. Barabasz and M. Barabasz, S. Ellis, S. Lakton, C. Lankton, Mathews, Nash, and Yapko. It is the same case in the book *Handbook of Clinical Hypnosis* (Lynn, Rhue, & Kirsch, 2010b), in which authors with different theoretical perspectives to his, such as Cardeña, Nash, Covino, Wark, Yapko, Spiegel, and Jensen, are included.

To summarize, Kirsch has been involved as sole or co-author and co-editor in integrative and innovative projects and publications, from epistemological, and theoretical, and applied points of view, in order to facilitate the development of psychotherapy and medical-psychological treatments that include hypnosis. He has aimed to maintain hypnosis within the field of scientific research, and has always distanced himself from lay hypnotherapists and those models that do not search for empiric support. And this is not only applicable to the hypnosis field, but also to the topic of psychotropic drugs used in psychotherapy, such as antidepressants or anxiolytics.

In short, Kirsch has contributed procedures to establish therapeutic alliance, rapport, and other common principles of different psychotherapies, such as expectancies. Even though Frank (1985) had already considered expectancies, he did not specify what Kirsch did subsequently, that response expectancies are another common principle to the psychotherapies and to the placebo effect. Moreover, Kirsch illustrated how response expectancies may help improve the efficacy of different psychotherapies. Therefore, besides working in the experimental field, Kirsch has worked

in clinical settings, contributing with explanatory factors as well. While keeping his own perspective, he has integrated innovative applications of hypnosis, like the Valencia Model of Waking Hypnosis and other contributions from different theoretical perspectives. Likewise, he has always aimed to obtain empirical evidence of his theories and clinical applications, with integrity and rigorous standards difficult to exceed.

Therefore, Kirsch has had an influence in psychotherapy providing a model to follow, by being an honest, creative, flexible, integrative, and innovative researcher and therapist.

Furthermore, and maybe what matters most to the authors of this paper, Kirsch is and has always been focused in the users, who are the ultimately receptors of the treatments, aiming to relieve their suffering and potentiate their well-being. This attitude has led him to stay away from commercial positions where users are considered a way to make money no matter whether they improve or not. Kirsch's attitude should be incorporated into the practice of those who work on relieving other's suffering and foster their well-being from different branches of knowledge, and especially within the hypnosis field, which historically has included fraud, malpractice, charlatanism, and unqualified practice.

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