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Attempt to Revive a Forgotten Childhood Language
by Means of Hypnosis¹

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A persisting question in the literature on hypnosis is whether the experience of age-regression can lead to the recovery of forgotten childhood memories, including language skills acquired as a child but forgotten in adulthood. This question is separate from that of the "reality" of hypnotic age regression, as evidenced by the multilingual adult's spontaneous shift during age regression to the language which s/he used as a child (Orne, 1951). The issue, rather, is whether the subjectively compelling experience of being a child again can activate childhood cognitive schemata (Reiff & Scheerer, 1959; see also O'Connell, Shor, & Orne, 1970).

Two previous case studies are relevant here. As (1962) found a college student who had spoken a Finnish-Swedish dialect until age eight, but who no longer remembered the language. With the aid of a graduate student assistant who spoke the same dialect, he administered

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a test of language knowledge to the subject in the normal waking state and during suggested regression to five years of age. The subject's apparent knowledge of the dialect was minimal on the waking test, and showed a significant but unimpressive improvement during age regression. Fromm (1970) has reported a more dramatic case of a second-generation Japanese-American who denied any knowledge of Japanese, but who spoke fluent (if childish) Japanese while age-regressed, as verified by a native speaker who listened to tape recordings of the hypnosis sessions. In contrast to the As case, in which the language seemed to have been subject to ordinary forgetting and childhood amnesia, Fromm's subject appeared to have repressed many memories of his early childhood, including his childhood second language, Japanese. Fromm's subject was apparently highly hypnotizable, scoring 12 points on a modified version of the Stanford Hypnotic Susceptibility Scale, Form A (SHSS:A), whereas the student studied by As scored somewhat lower, eight points, on the standard SHSS:A. These two papers are the only such reports available in the published literature, so when a similar case came to the attention of the laboratory, we took the opportunity to conduct yet another case study.

Case Report

D.S., an undergraduate engineering student, came to the laboratory after witnessing a demonstration of hypnotic phenomena during his introductory psychology course. He had lived on Taiwan with his parents (who were American missionaries), from age two to seven; while there he attended Chinese nursery school and kindergarten, and a kindergarten and first grade run by the American community. Although he had

spoken appreciable Mandarin as a schoolchild on Taiwan, he had promptly lost it upon returning to the United States. His present knowledge was limited to a few words: hao pao (literally, "good boy," a badge of merit worn by deserving Taiwanese school pupils) and nega ("that thing"). He wished to know whether hypnosis could help him recover more of the language, and so did we.

The first two sessions were devoted to assessing the subject's responsivity to hypnosis. He proved to be rather unsusceptible by conventional standards, scoring three points on SHSS:A, and receiving an adjusted score of three points on the Stanford Hypnotic Susceptibility Scale, Form C (SHSS:C), which was discontinued before the age regression item after the subject failed three suggestions. Nevertheless, D. S. possessed high motivation for the experiment, so we persevered. In subsequent sessions D. S. practiced entering hypnosis and responding to hypnotic suggestions. Subjectively, he reported that he benefitted by a "counting" form of induction with fractionation, but he remained unresponsive to even rudimentary suggestions. After some practice he was administered the age-regression item of SHSS:C, which he failed. Altogether, four additional practice sessions were conducted.

During this period D. S. was also interviewed concerning his memories of the five years spent in Taiwan. These memories seemed rather plentiful, involving sights, friends, holidays, and personal experiences which were not likely to have been part of family lore. His family had taken many photographs during their stay, but he had not seen these in several years. At the same time, it should be noted

that many of these memories were rather vague as to detail: for example, he could not recall the names of any of his friends or Chinese teachers. In any case, D. S. remembered the time in Taiwan as quite pleasant, and he strongly desired to return there in a professional capacity.

With the aid of two Mandarin-speaking students (Peter H. Rushton and Ku Wan-Ch'ing), a language test was prepared and administered to D. S. in the normal waking state and during hypnotic age regression. The test consisted of 50 simple questions posed in Mandarin (e.g., "What is your name?" "Did you have friends at school?" "What was the most fun at New Year's?" etc.) The subject's replies to these questions were scored according to the following scheme:

- 0 -- No understanding;
- 1 -- Partial understanding;
- 2 -- Complete understanding, but unable to reply;
- 3 -- Able to reply sensibly in Mandarin.

The waking test session began with D.S. listening to the two assistants conversing in Mandarin; at one point one of them counted from 1 to 20, named the days of the week, months of the year, and primary colors (without, of course, identifying the nature of the series in English); after this conversation resumed, this time obviously focused on objects and persons in the experimental room; the assistants attempted to engage D.S. in this conversation, to no avail. Then they administered the language test. D. S. scored 6 out of a total of 150 possible points. The successes all represented recognitions of words such as "Taipei," "brother and sister," "mother and father," etc.; he correctly identified his Chinese nickname and a brand of native softdrink; but at no time did he understand the context in which these words were spoken.

The hypnotic test was no more successful. D.S. was hypnotized and, after some time, reported that he was in a moderately deep state of hypnosis (a subjective rating of 8-9 on an open-ended scale where 4-5 represented moderately hypnotized, and 10 represented very deeply hypnotized); he was then regressed to his fifth- and first-grade classrooms, and then to kindergarten in Taiwan. In all cases D. S. reported that he was able to imagine himself in the suggested environment, sometimes vividly. It was then suggested that he was in his family home in Taiwan, listening to some friends of his parents conversing together. At this point the two assistants began speaking in Mandarin, following the same format as the prior waking test session. This time D. S. scored a total of four points on the test -- the drop from his original score stemming from his reluctance merely to identify obvious words such as "Taiwan." Interestingly, D.S. reported that he often felt that the meaning of some of the words and phrases were "on the tip of the tongue." Nevertheless, his test scores did not change appreciably; further work was discontinued to spare him any additional frustration. (He now intends to enroll in an intensive course in Chinese language.)

Discussion

In the context of the two successful cases cited previously, the results of the present study indicate that systematic research on the hypnotic recovery of forgotten childhood language is in order. Taken together, the three cases suggest that two variables may importantly affect the prospects for such recovery: hypnotizability and source of memory loss. Fromm's subject, the most successful case, was very

highly hypnotizable, whereas As' case was rather less hypnotizable and the present subject clearly unsusceptible. Moreover, the childhood language seems to have been repressed along with other childhood memories by Fromm's subject, while the other two subjects appear to have been the victims of ordinary forgetting and childhood amnesia. The relationship of these variables to the success of hypnotic revivification attempts can be assessed in a reasonably sized case series, the material for which should be fairly easy to obtain in a university population.

References

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