

Introduction

Malik et al. (2021) published a case study named "Treatment of Severe and Social Phobia by Hypnosis and Neurolinguistic Programming" in the *Annals of Psychophysiology* journal in 2021. In this case study they examined the effects of hypnosis and NLP on the treatment of severe anxiety and social phobia in a 20-year-old man. I chose this study because I myself utilize NLP and hypnosis in my work, and I am interested in how this approach can be used to alleviate anxiety. In this critical analysis, I will assess the study's stance, approach, definitions, method, and reporting, striving to view these aspects through an epistemological, ontological, and ethical lens.

Critical Analysis of the Study

The researchers had previously treated tobacco addiction with hypnosis, and in this study, they integrated NLP interventions into hypnosis. The patient, referred by another doctor, was assessed by one of the study authors, a general practitioner. During the appointment, details about the patient's background and anxiety symptoms, including medication and its effects, were obtained.

The article states that anxiety disorders, including phobias, are prevalent and significantly impact daily life, causing those affected to avoid triggers and thereby diminishing their quality of life. The description in the article, though outlining the widespread nature and impact of these disorders, is somewhat rudimentary. A comprehensive exploration of treatment options and a deeper understanding of triggers would offer readers a more holistic view of these disorders.

The study reports that the patient reported a 70% improvement after just the first session. His phobia's severity was significantly controlled in a short time, almost without any episodes after the first hypnosis and NLP session. Recovery from anxiety was described as a restoration of self-confidence, which was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The DASS-21 scale was used as another self-reporting measure to monitor improvement. I believe that mood improvement and the experience of self-confidence are subjective experiences. Therefore, I agree that self-assessment is an appropriate method to evaluate the alleviation of anxiety, which is validated using different scales.

The study utilized hypnosis with integrated NLP interventions. The researchers define hypnosis as a method that does not focus solely on suggestions in the patient's unconscious state but allows the patient's mind to guide and connect to previously stored information. The study also lists various issues, including anxiety, that can be treated with hypnosis. I feel that the definition provides a general understanding of what hypnosis is, but it remains unclear what 'stored information' refers to and what else one might focus on besides suggestions. The American Psychological Association (APA) offers more information on hypnosis by defining it as a method or state that is created using a specific procedure and uses suggestions to elicit changes in sensations, perceptions, thinking, feelings, and motor behavior. Subjects vary in their receptivity to suggestions to act, feel, and behave differently than in a normal waking state (American Psychological Association, 2023).

In the study, NLP is defined as a form of psychotherapy that focuses on identifying 'anchors', which are triggers that cause phobia in the patient's unconscious state. In my opinion, the description clearly defines the significance of an anchor as a trigger for phobia, but overall the description is limited, leaving it unclear what NLP is. Dilts et al. (1980) define NLP as examining subjective experiences and focusing on utility rather than theoretical accuracy. NLP provides tools for beneficially organizing and redefining experiences to achieve desired behavioral outcomes.

The methodology used was a case report, a qualitative research method that seeks to explore a process (Creswell, 2009, p. 104). In a case study, one can investigate a single event to understand the phenomenon comprehensively and in-depth (Metsämuuronen, 2005, p. 205). The study focused on the patient's history, the impact of anxiety and phobia on his life, and the effects of medication. Two hypnosis sessions were administered at 2-week intervals. Before the first session, the patient's condition was measured using the DASS-21 and Rosenberg self-esteem scales. After the first session, with the patient feeling better, the medication was reduced by mutual agreement with the doctor. Two weeks later, depression, anxiety, and stress levels were measured again before the second treatment. The improvement was monitored for a total of one month, and the patient's treatment was still ongoing at the time of writing the article. Given the sample size of 1 in this case study, the research findings cannot be generalized to a broader population. However, in line with earlier references, I believe that this case study is an appropriate approach for studying a process with a small sample to increase understanding of the researched topic.

The study stated that the patient participated after giving informed consent and agreed to publication. However, the specific details of the consent were unclear, and it is unknown if the patient received comprehensive information about the risks, benefits, and alternatives of the treatment method before giving consent.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Study

The strength of the study lies in the detailed description of the patient's background, previous treatment experiences, and the outcomes of the combined treatment of hypnosis and NLP. This thorough description provides readers with a comprehensive understanding of the significance of the treatment for the individual. Additionally, the inclusion of references to prior research, especially those related to hypnosis, enhances the study's credibility, and positions it within the broader scientific discourse. It is also noteworthy that one of the researchers has expertise in both hypnosis and medicine, ensuring that the patient's treatment decisions are based on medical knowledge and experience.

The study has several weaknesses. The use of medication during the combined hypnosis-NLP treatment is mentioned, but its potential influence on treatment outcomes remains unclear. The small sample size also limits the generalization of results to a broader patient population. More justification is needed for combining NLP with hypnosis, as the details and selection of the NLP intervention in age regression and submodalities were not clearly explained, hindering study reproducibility. The researchers' expertise in NLP is also not clarified. The reference to a rat study on the IRE1 α -XBP1 pathway and PTSD model rats, lacks clear explanation of its relevance to NLP and triggers for phobias. Providing more connections between these areas in future analyses would enhance the reader's understanding of their significance.

The Research in Relation to Other Studies

This research deals with the effectiveness of the combination of hypnotherapy and NLP in the treatment of anxiety disorders and offers promising results from the use of these interventions in reducing anxiety. It is important to place this research in a broader research field, as there is less available research specifically on this combination. While the effect of hypnosis and NLP on anxiety has been studied separately, research combining the two approaches is rarely found. However, recent reviews that compile multiple studies together have given promising results about the effectiveness of both approaches in treating anxiety. For instance, Patel (2020) found in her

dissertation that both hypnotherapy and NLP were effective in reducing anxiety, but hypnotherapy proved more effective than NLP. Additionally, in a meta-analysis published by Valentine et al. (2019), it was found that hypnotherapy is a highly effective intervention for treating anxiety disorders. They found that hypnotherapy was as effective as other established treatments such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, progressive muscle relaxation, and psychodynamic psychotherapy, and might even be more effective than mindfulness. Furthermore, hypnotherapy was more effective when combined with other psychological interventions than as a standalone treatment. On the other hand, in a systematic review conducted by Trumm (2018), it was concluded that the evidence for the effectiveness of hypnotherapy in treating anxiety disorders is insufficient. This was mainly due to the low methodological quality of the studies that Trumm reviewed, as well as their limited number, not being extensive enough to draw conclusions.

Summary

In conclusion, this research offers promising results on the use of the combination of hypnotherapy and NLP in the treatment of anxiety disorders. However, it is important to consider previous research that has yielded both positive and negative results regarding the effects of these interventions on anxiety. The quality of the research and the limited scope of the research field are important factors to consider when interpreting the results of this study. More high-quality studies are needed to confirm the effectiveness of the combination of hypnotherapy and NLP in treating anxiety disorders.

This research is significant as it seeks to understand alternative treatment methods. While the case study provides in-depth insight into a single case, there are limitations to its generalizability. It should be noted that although the patient reported improvement, the study does not provide a comparison to a scenario where the patient was not treated, or another form of treatment was used. The experience of anxiety is subjective, and therefore, it is essential to recognize and understand potential limitations and biases that were not highlighted in the article. Although we gain valuable information from this specific case, it is important to bear in mind its limitations, especially when considering the generalizability of the results.

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