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Beware Mesmer Thieves!

Q:

Can thieves really use hypnosis to rob people? There's a strange news story from England in which that's claimed to have happened.

—Paul Harris

A:

I examined the bizarre case Harris referred to and began by consulting several news sources (Dubuis and Freeman 2014, Telegraph Video 2014, etc.). An article in the *London Evening Standard* summarized the circumstances:

A “hypnotist thief” apparently put the owner of an upmarket off-licence in a trance before rifling through his trouser pockets and stealing the day’s takings. Friends today said Aftab Haider, 56, the owner of independent wine merchants Hops and Pops in Highgate, north London, was “stunned” by the theft of hundreds of pounds in cash. The raid mirrors techniques used as entertainment by street magicians and is the first time its use in crime has been captured on CCTV in the UK. The suspect, an Eastern European man wearing a black bomber jacket, brushed past Mr. Haider as he placed a bottle on a shelf, and gently tapped him on the arm. A few seconds later, the suspect made a stabbing gesture with his right hand at eye-level which appeared to leave Mr. Haider, known as Aziz, mesmerised. He reached inside the motionless shop owner’s trouser pocket, and pulled out his wallet before briefly squeezing his shoulder. The thief, who kept up a quietly-spoken patter throughout, then mimed the gesture of a pregnant woman’s belly

as Mr. Haider turned to face him. He reached into his other pocket and pulled out the day’s takings, hundreds of pounds in a bundle of notes, before tapping him once more on the shoulder and quickly walking out. Mr. Haider snapped out of the trance a few seconds later. (Dubuis and Freeman 2014)

The event happened around 9:45 on the evening of September 11, 2014, nearly three months before the story was reported (reasons for the delay are not clear but may have been the result of police trying to restart a stalled investigation by releasing the security camera footage and asking the public for assistance in identifying the thief). Detective Sergeant Dave Bullock was quoted in the news story: “The victim remained motionless and unable to stop the robbery taking place. He said that he was momentarily unaware of what had happened to him. The suspect’s distraction tactics appeared to have worked as he robbed the victim of cash from his pocket.”



A Closer Look

The news story was widely taken at face value at the time and shared as a “weird news” item in news outlets and on social media. However, a closer look at the reported circumstances of the theft raises skeptical questions. For example, how could the thief know that Mr. Haider had the day’s receipts in his pocket at that time? The money could have been anywhere in the business, from a safe to a cash register, yet the robber seemed to know exactly where the money was and when. Furthermore, the video does not, in fact, reveal the shopkeeper being “mesmerized.”

There is no clinical evidence whatsoever that a hypnotist can make a person simply forget an experience they had—in fact the effect is usually exactly the opposite; a careless hypnotist can easily create false memories of things that never happened.

Though many news stories stated that as an obvious and established truth, there is of course no way to confirm that aside from Haider’s own claim—which may or may not be accurate even assuming that is his sincere belief.

In trying to address the implausibility of a single-event hypnosis, some claimed that the thief must have previously pre-hypnotized Haider in preparation for such a bold and bizarre robbery. Magician Damien O’Brien, who has appeared on the BBC, speculated in the *Eve-ning Standard* that Haider may have been previously hypnotized by the suspected thief who unconsciously implanted “trigger words” that would allow a quick hypnosis on a later visit: “He may have said on an earlier visit that the next time he comes in and touches the man on the shoulder he is going to go into a relaxed trance and will let him go into his pockets. The

shoulder touch could be a trigger.”

Yet why would the hypnosis thief tap his victim on the shoulder, apparently bringing him to his senses, just before leaving? If you have someone doing your will and under your power, why would you release them from that power before—not after—trying to escape? Any thief who wanted to assure a clean getaway would simply leave the shopkeeper mesmerized; to not do so is like a bank robber pausing to untie his or her bound victims before leaving the bank so they can promptly summon police.

And why would a thief risk going into the same place twice? Sometimes

thieves may make a trial run to “case the joint” and establish entrances, exits, security measures of an intended robbery, and so on—but that’s apparently not what happened here since the route in and out is very short and clear, and there was seemingly no effort to evade security cameras. There’s also the unasked question of why, if the thief had previously hypnotized Haider, he wouldn’t remember the encounter. This element of the story echoes popular culture assumptions of hypnosis but not the psychological research. There is no clinical evidence whatsoever that a hypnotist can make a person simply forget an experience they had—in fact the effect is usually exactly the opposite; a careless hypnotist can easily create false memories of things that never happened.

There has been no follow up arrests or additional information on this strange case since it made the news, and at this remove it’s impossi-

ble to know what exactly happened in that London shop. However, a hypnotist thief is the least likely explanation. It’s more likely that Haider was simply confused or stunned for a few moments during the robbery (when startling things—such as a robbery—happen people sometimes simply and involuntarily “freeze up” in an indecisive fight-or-flight moment; this might account for the statement that he was “momentarily unaware” of his surroundings). In fact, the thief’s actions look very much like those of an accomplished pickpocket using distraction and misdirection, and the sensational hypnotism claim may simply be a post-hoc rationalization by Haider for his inaction. It’s also possible that the robbery was staged; faked workplace robberies and thefts are not unknown and allow employees to account for missing money.

Other Hypnosis Thefts

This is not the first time that people have reported being robbed by hypnotists. In 2014 a German woman claimed she was hypnotized (by psychics, no less) outside of a supermarket, put into a trance, and later woke up at home having been robbed:

A pair of hypnotists are being hunted by police after a victim claimed she was put in a trance before being robbed. Police in Germany are investigating a spate of crimes involving two Russian women who tell their victims they will read their fortune. In one incident 66 year-old Sarah Alexeyeva told detectives she was spoken to outside an Aldi supermarket in Elmshorn, Schleswig-Holstein. But the next thing she knew she snapped out of a trance and was sat in her armchair at home. All her jewellery and valuables had disappeared, police said. (Bradley 2014)

According to a 2008 BBC News story, “Police in Italy have issued footage of a man who is suspected of hypnotizing supermarket check-out staff to hand over money from their cash registers. In every case, the

last thing staff reportedly remembered was the thief leaning over and saying: 'Look into my eyes,' before finding the till empty" ('Hypnotist' Thief 2008).

There's a certain creepy gothic fear to the idea that a mesmerizing stranger can ask you to stare deeply into his eyes, or ask you to follow a pocket watch swaying seductively to and fro, and listen to him count backwards into a hypnotic trance. But it's pure fiction. Hypnosis is a widely misunderstood psychological phenomenon, due largely to its depictions in popular culture and film. One common myth about hypnosis is that it can put someone into a helpless or suggestible trancelike state. If it were possible to simply stare deeply into a stranger's eyes to induce a trancelike, compliant state, then it would happen all the time. Anyone with practice or skill in hypnosis could easily turn to a life of crime by walking into a bank, casting a hypnotic stare at a teller, and take whatever they like. In their book *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology*, psychologists Scott Lilienfeld, Steven Jay

Lynn, John Ruscio, and Barry Beyerstein debunk this popular myth:

Recent survey data show that public opinion resonates with media portrayals of hypnosis. Specifically, 77% of college students endorsed the statement that "hypnosis is an altered state of consciousness, quite different from normal waking consciousness." . . . But research refutes these widely accepted beliefs. Hypnotized people are by no means mindless automatons. (Lilienfeld et al. 2010)

Hypnosis is not some special altered state of consciousness but simply a form of deep relaxation. Stage hypnosis—such as the kind seen in Las Vegas comedy acts where "suggestible" audience members get onstage and pretend to be chickens or caught in embarrassing situations—is not true clinical hypnosis but instead a combination of showmanship, exhibitionism, and participatory comedy. It's not clear why a person would believe or assume that he or she had been put into a hypnotic trance when they had not. Such a belief may be due to memory loss or

confusion, but there's no reason to fear hypnotist bandits. ■

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