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HANDWRITING AND FORGERY UNDER HYPNOSIS

George J. Lacy¹

The effects of hypnosis on handwriting forms an interesting but virtually untouched field of research. To the handwriting expert certain phases of such experiments can reveal valuable information. In particular two distinct problems are of interest: (1) The effect of hypnosis in forgery, and (2) the influence of suggested age while in a hypnotic trance on the natural writing of the subject. In order to arrive at some conclusions to questions raised by these problems the writer has begun a series of experiments¹ in which he is now making a report of work in progress.

FORGERY UNDER HYPNOSIS

Can a person in the hypnotic trance simulate another person's signature so successfully that it will escape detection as a fraud even under the most careful and expert scrutiny? In other words, does a person in the hypnotic state have a greater than normal ability to imitate the handwriting of another person? It is possible that an examiner of questioned documents might be asked this question while on the witness stand.

In the past two decades, several experiments have been conducted in American universities in which the abilities of hypnotized persons have been compared with the abilities of the same persons in the normal state. It has been shown that certain abilities are greater in the trance than in the normal state; for example, psychologists have found that some persons, while in the trance, can recall memories of their childhood which are not available to them in their waking state. It has also been discovered that the recall of material previously committed to memory, either in the distant or near past, is more effective in the trance than it is in the normal state.

On the other hand the sensory capacities of individuals are found to be the same in both states. That is to say, when one is hypnotized his sense of touch, his sense of sight, his hearing, cannot be made more acute than they are in the ordinary normal state. Also, the evidence seems to indicate that muscular endurance is not greater in the trance than in the normal state. So far as the writer knows no experiment on muscular coordination, as distinguished from endurance, has been performed. Of course such an experiment would have a very close relationship to the problem

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of handwriting now under discussion.² Daniel T. Ames³ in the late 1800's ran an experiment on just one person to determine whether or not handwriting under hypnotism retained all of its normal characteristics; he concluded that it did. The writer's experiment, however, was made to determine whether or not a person under a hypnotic trance is more capable of simulating the signature of another person.

The plan adopted for this experiment involved the securing of thirty genuine signatures written on plain 3"x5" cards each with the same pen. This gave a fairly good variety of different types and qualities of signatures. These were divided into two groups, of fifteen each, and labeled "A" and "B".

The subject was first given the fifteen cards of Series A while in a normal waking state and asked to imitate each signature. He was requested to write each signature two or three times. The subject was then placed in a hypnotic trance and given the cards bearing the signatures in Series B. He was told by the hypnotist that he was able to imitate the signatures perfectly, that he was able to write them so perfectly that there would be no difference in his imitation and the genuine. The subject was requested to write each signature two or three times.

When Series B was finished he was given Series A with the same instructions. On completing Series A, he was awakened from the trance and after a reasonable length of time was given Series B to imitate while in a waking state.

This method of experimenting was followed in order to equalize the effects of practice as Series A written in the trance might be expected to be affected by practice gained in forging Series A in the normal state. Likewise Series B written in the normal state might be affected by practice in Series B obtained in the trance. However, in the course of the experiment it became very clear that this arrangement was unnecessary, since no practice effects were apparent, the last written imitation of a given signature being as a rule no better than the first. These specimens of the subjects, attempts at simulation both in the waking state and in the trance, gave ample material for comparison.

Thirteen subjects of college age, both male and female, were used; some were good writers and some were poor. It was noticed during these experiments that some of the subjects exercised more care in their attempt at simulation than others. Where some subjects would study the signatures extensively, before attempting an imitation, others would attempt to draw the signature offhand. One subject, a girl, would practice the movement by holding her

² The problems just mentioned are fully discussed in C. L. Hull, *Hypnosis and Suggestibility: An Experimental Approach* (1933).

³ Daniel T. Ames, *Ames on Forgery* (1901).



Figure 1

The above signatures are "cut-outs" from the originals made during the experiment. Those numbered (1) are genuine signatures; those numbered (2) are attempted simulations of the genuine signatures prepared by subjects in a normal state; and those numbered (3) are the same subject's attempt at simulation while in a hypnotic trance.

pen over the genuine signature and following the outline of the signature. This she would do repeatedly, in some cases as many as fifteen times.

With the exception of one or two, all the attempts at simulation were the products of drawing rather than writing (Figure 1). This was proven true of the simulations while in the trance, by placing before the subject the signature card up-side-down. When this was done the subject would draw the signature up-side-down and backwards, paradoxical as this may seem. Signatures written in this manner were formed as well as the others.

The subjects used all went into a deep state of hypnosis, the state usually called somnambulism. Most of them had no memory for the events of the trance after they were brought out of it. The operator, who has had extensive experience with hypnosis, assured himself in every case of the genuineness of the trance, and he had no reason to think that any of the subjects was simulating a trance state.

It was observed that those subjects who received instructions while in the trance, but prior to their starting to write and were not talked to while writing, usually produced better results than those whom the hypnotists continued to assure of their ability while writing. This was attributed to giving the subjects over-confidence.

The ability to imitate a signature either in the waking state or in the trance was found to be greater in some subjects than in others. This, of course, is to be expected.

A study and comparison of the attempt at simulation in the waking state and in the trance does not indicate that subjects have any more ability to simulate a signature while in a hypnotic trance than in the waking state. There is no definite evidence of better muscular coordination so far as handwriting is concerned while in a hypnotic trance than otherwise. Neither is there evidence pointing to any better ability to observe inconspicuous characteristics and peculiarities in a signature.

Out of all of the numerous signatures written by various subjects, both in the trance and in the normal state, there is not one that does not have the inherent qualities of a forged signature.

INFLUENCE OF SUGGESTED AGE ON HANDWRITING

In addition to this experiment, an experiment was conducted to determine, if possible, whether a person in a hypnotic trance is able to duplicate his writing of an earlier age. While the subjects were in the trance, the hypnotist made them regress to the ages of 8, 12, and 15 years and instructed them to write as they did at that age. The result of this experiment does not justify the conclusion that a person in hypnotic trance could simulate his writing

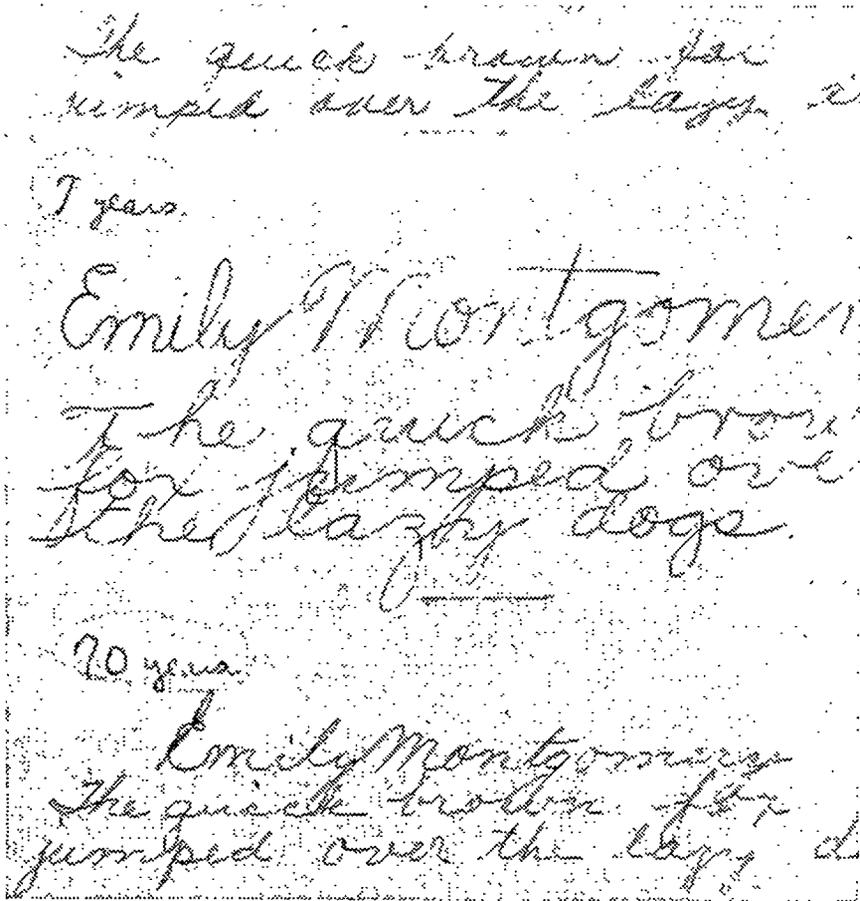


Figure 2

Three writing specimens by the same subject while in a hypnotic trance. The top writing is the results when told to write in his normal handwriting. The middle specimen is the results when the subject was told he was seven years old. The bottom writing is the results when he was told that he was seventy years old.

of an earlier age. These specimens of writing indicated that the writer merely wrote as he surmised that he wrote at these different ages (Figure 2). This was verified in some cases by the comparison of the exemplars with genuine writing of the suggested age. In most cases when the subject was imitating his writing of 8 or 10 years of age, he would write in a slow, drawn, large hand.

It was interesting to note that one of the subjects, while in the trance, was told to write his name as he did at the age of 8, 10, 12, 15, etc.; it was found that when told he was 15, he changed the spelling of his name. When this subject was awakened from the trance he had no recollection of events which occurred while

he was in the trance. When he was questioned about the change in the spelling of his name, he explained that he really had changed the spelling of his name about the age of 15.

To further verify that the subject was not actually imitating his former writing but merely writing as he imagined he wrote, he was told by the hypnotist that he was advanced to the ages of 40, 60 and 75 years. These writings would show tremor and as the age advanced the tremor would increase. The quality of this tremor was not that of genuine tremor due to age but indicated the forgery of this characteristic (Figure 2).

An effort was made to determine whether or not there was anything characteristic about the normal handwriting of a person in a hypnotic trance. Comparisons and study were made of this class of writing, with the normal handwriting of the subject in a waking state; when comparison was possible, the writer was unable to find anything that differentiates these two classes of writing.

SUMMARY

While the number of subjects used in this experiment was not large, nevertheless the evidence obtained in this study points in every case definitely toward the conclusion that a person in the hypnotic trance is no more able to simulate a signature than he is in the normal state.

Likewise evidence obtained from the analysis of subject's handwriting while under a hypnotic trance indicates that a person cannot simulate his writing of an earlier age and his attempts to simulate writing of an old person has the usual faults of such imitations.