

Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893) and Hysteria

Charcot was a French neurologist who first classified nervous diseases and who discovered multiple sclerosis (Sahakian, 1975). During the final phase of his career he developed an interest in hysteria (now conversion disorder, involving physical complaints but lacking organic causes) and hypnosis. Charcot considered hysteria a neurosis that lacked any demonstrable brain damage but which resulted in clinical symptoms (Bogousslavsky, Walusinski, and Veyrunes, 2009). In 1878 he began to use hypnosis with hysterics and even considered susceptibility to hypnosis to be synonymous with the disorder. Charcot traced the disorder to the uterus (Sahakian, 1975). The hypnotic trance was considered a state of neurosis that involved three phases: 1) a state of lethargy and a lack of openness to suggestion; 2) catalepsy in which the person could be molded into and would maintain certain postures; and 3) somnambulism and openness to suggestion.

Hysterics presented losses of sensation (not responding to pin pricks), blindness, difficulty walking, even paralysis (Sarason and Sarason, 1993). Besides such inexplicable symptoms, the patients displayed *la belle indifférence* (the beautiful indifference) in that, instead of being bothered or depressed, the patient seemed unconcerned. Furthermore, the patients had uneducated theories about bodily functions that fit into their physical symptoms. Charcot eventually came to the conclusions that disorders had a psychological cause. That led to the use of hypnosis to eliminate the symptoms.

References

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