

Hypnosis without Hypnosis: Fact or Fiction?

Or the Relation of Hypnotism to Strategic Therapy

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■ *This paper is an inquiry into the origins and the validity of using such expressions as "hypnosis without hypnosis" and "hypnotherapy without trance induction." It is also an inquiry into the existence or non-existence of a relationship between hypnotic phenomena and strategic therapy. The two expressions appear to have had their origin in a subsequently published 1983 presentation of Paul Watzlawick's. His failure to explicitly state what he meant by "hypnotic effects" leaves it entirely up to his readers to interpret what he may have had in mind. An examination of the matter from a so-called traditional as well as a general Ericksonian viewpoint does not give support for using these expressions which must be considered generally invalid, to be ignored where used in the past, and to be discarded for future uses. There is also no basis for thinking that a general or specific relationship exists between strategic therapy and hypnotherapy and hypnotism. Strategic therapy ought to be considered as a distinct and separate approach to psychotherapy that can be used alone or in combination with hypnotism but which is not the equivalent of hypnotherapy.*

Part I

That we have gathered these days to talk, at least in part, about hypnosis is clear. Perhaps less clear is what exactly is to be understood by this term "hypnosis." Historically there always seems to have been a certain degree of confusion regarding what "hypnosis" was all about, but nothing quite like what we are dealing with today. Not only are we confronted today with attempts to make distinctions between "traditional," Ericksonian, and something called the "new" hypnosis, and by intimations that "laboratory" and "clinical" hypnosis are fundamentally different, but there is more. We have been told directly and indirectly by a number of modern Ericksonian authorities that not only is it possible to have "hypnosis without hypnosis" but that, in essence, this is what strategic therapy is.

I first encountered these two propositions several years ago in the title of an introductory work by Jacques-Antoine Malarewicz titled, *La stratégie en thérapie ou l'hypnose sans l'hypnose de Milton H. Erickson* (Malarewicz, 1988). Two things about this title immediately bothered me. Foremost was the fact that, as I understood the term "hypnosis," it simply was not possible for it to be simultaneously present and not present. But also my knowledge of strategic therapy was not in accord with the implication in this title that it had anything to do with hypnosis.

Using the terms "hypnosis" and "suggestion" in the sense Bernheim had given them (Weitzenhoffer, 1989), one of my first thoughts was that the author maybe had in mind the use of suggestion without an accompanying induction of hypnosis. For, from at least 1890 on, it had become a widespread practice to extend, initially, the term "hypnotism," and later, the term "hypnosis" to this situation. If this were so, then all the author was saying was that strategic therapy amounted to a use of suggestion in the absence of a hypnotic state. In this case the paradox inherent in the title would be merely a semantical one and not one for deep concern. At least this much could be settled.

Unfortunately further study of the book did not support this particular solution nor offer any obvious foundation for the author's choice of title. His clearest statement regarding the nature of strategic therapy is to be found on page 21. There he states: "Generally speaking, one can consider a therapist to have a strategic orientation when he finds the way, throughout the course of a therapy, to choose from among those tools available to him to do interventions, those that are the most appropriate for accomplishing this therapy" (Malarewicz, 1988, p. 21).

This definition is quite close to the one that Jay Haley originally gave some 15 years earlier and which goes as follows: "A therapy can be called strategic if the clinician initiates what happens during therapy and designs a particular approach for each problem" (Haley, 1973, p. 17). On the next page he adds: "Strategic therapy is not a particular approach or theory but a name for those types of therapy where the therapist takes responsibility for directly influencing people."

Clearly, anyone following such an approach to therapy (really, psychotherapy), might be expected, but not necessarily so, to sometimes use hypnotic techniques. Such techniques surely would constitute some of the tools Malarewicz refers to. That is, a use of hypnotism would be a natural incidental consequence of being a strategic therapist. On the other hand there is nothing specifically said regarding or even alluding to hypnosis in these definitions and its use is not even specifically prescribed. Yet, if we are to believe Malarewicz, we should be able to find something in these two definitions leading to the conclusion that strategic therapy amounts to doing hypnosis without hypnosis. Failing to do this and having the opportunity to question Malarewicz in person on this issue, I was able to elicit from him the further explanation that strategic therapies were based on the use of the same kind of strategies that Erickson had used in the context of doing "hypnotherapy," but without any hypnotic state being visibly induced! Malarewicz appeared to think that it was obvious one could conclude from this

that hypnosis was therefore being done without hypnosis. But to say this, one has to assume everything Erickson did in the course of doing hypnotherapy was "hypnotic" in nature. To my knowledge Erickson himself never claimed or even intimated this was the case, nor has this been a demonstrated fact! Nor is there any obvious necessity to make such an inference in order to understand how or why strategic therapy works. I would add that over the years I interacted with Erickson I never heard him speak of doing "hypnosis without hypnosis."

In any event Malarewicz could not have obtained the two notions directly from Erickson, never having met him. However, five years earlier he did attend a conference at which Paul Watzlawick presented a paper titled "Hypnotherapy without trance induction." If one substitutes the word "hypnosis" for "trance" here there can be little question that Watzlawick's paper was essentially concerned with the same issues as Malarewicz later was. The paper was subsequently published. Let us then look at what Watzlawick had to say in these regards, hoping it may throw further light on the matter at hand.

Quite early in his article, Watzlawick, who did know Erickson, explains that "my topic has to do with linguistic structures - or language games, as Wittgenstein would have called them - that have a virtually hypnotic effect, although no formal trance induction precedes them" (Watzlawick, 1985, p. 6).

How are we to understand this proposition? Watzlawick's reference to "language games," clearly a highly specialized term whose exact meaning only student's of Wittgenstein's writings could know, opens the door to the possibility that other terms and expressions he uses, such as "linguistic structure," are also being employed here in unspecified technical, specialized senses. If so we are in trouble and hardly better off than if Watzlawick's paper had been written in some tongue unknown to us or had never been written. I suspect that most people who heard Watzlawick or later read his paper merely ignored his reference to "language games" and/or assumed it meant the same thing as his reference to "linguistic structure" and, then, have simply translated the latter as denoting any meaningful arrangement of words. For lack of something better, I propose that we follow suit as the alternative to altogether ignoring what Watzlawick has said as so much obscure technical jargon. I think some authorities on Wittgenstein might question the equation we are making regarding "language games" and we shall shortly have reasons to make a second guess in this regard.

It seems to me at this point that what Watzlawick is saying is as follows: there exist certain meaningful arrangements of words or ways of communicating that lead to a situation which is, for all intents and purposes, like one that exists when a hypnotic state is induced, even though no recognizable, accepted, method of producing a hypnotic state, or trance, has been explicitly, used. But, going by dictionaries, (such as the Oxford English Dictionary, 1991, p. 805), properly speaking, to say that something is "hypnotic" is only to say that it is "of, pertaining to, or of the nature of hypnotism or 'nervous sleep'; accompanied by hypnotism; producing hypnotism, hypnotizing."

Also note that there is nothing in this definition that says the hypnotic state in question has to be the result of the use of a "formal" induction and that it has long been accepted that states otherwise indistinguishable from those thus induced can come about in other ways. The door is therefore open to speaking of something being "hypnotic" in the absence of any visible (formal) trance (hypnosis) induction. But this last does require that there exist some other criterion on which we and Watzlawick can base our use of the term "hypnotic" when no trance (hypnosis) induction, formal or informal, is known to have taken place. More particularly, then what is it about a linguistic structure that allows Watzlawick to say it has "a virtually hypnotic effect?" Watzlawick does not tell us.

This is perhaps nitpicking, but I cannot help wondering here whether Watzlawick has intentionally specified the induction to be "formal" in the passage I quoted. Could that be significant for our understanding of this "virtual hypnotic effect?" On the other hand, since one can have informal inductions and even spontaneous occurrences of trances there is really nothing remarkable about doing hypnotherapy in the absence of a formal induction. Also in the title of his talk and paper and in the next proposition we shall be examining he simply refers to trances, that is, without qualifications. I am therefore prone to think that he really did not intend to select out "formal" trances. I will assume this in the rest of my presentation.

In any event, short of telling us what he understands by "hypnotic effects," Watzlawick could have provided us with some examples of linguistic structures that have virtually "hypnotic effects," or given us clues regarding how one can recognize them. Instead, following a brief digression, he tells us: "Hypnotherapy without trance, then, is meant to include those language games which have their origin (or are at least used predominantly) in hypnosis, but can be taken over and applied to the larger context of general psychotherapy" (Watzlawick, 1985, p. 6).

He then immediately proceeds to give the following partial listing of the "language games" he has in mind, namely,

1. Learning and using the client's "language";
2. Avoidance of "n"-words (negations) and, in general, of negative formulations;
3. Puns, condensations, innuendos, etc;
4. Preempting;
5. Unresolved remnants;
6. Utilization of resistance (and even its deliberate creation for the purpose of subsequent utilization);
7. Storytelling and the use of other metaphors;
8. The confusion technique;
9. The "worse fantasy" technique.

And that's it! Having made an abrupt switch from talking about linguistic structures to talking about interventions and techniques, he now makes a further abrupt switch that

leads him in still other directions that, unfortunately, add nothing to our understanding of what he has just been speaking. Insofar as to what he has in mind when he speaks of a "virtual hypnotic effect," we have come to a dead end!

Whatever meaning Watzlawick's first proposition may have had for him, it can have no more meaning for us than if he had told us instead that he is talking about linguistic structures that have a "xyfl" effect. The catch here is that he has used the term "hypnotic" and not a nonsense syllable, as I just did. Quite naturally, on hearing this word each of us is likely to automatically hear or read, rightly or wrongly, whatever meaningful association we make to it on the moment of hearing it. Thus, what he says initially appears quite meaningful. For instance, when I hear the word "hypnosis" I first make the association "state of being which enhances suggestibility." Dictionary-wise, enhancing suggestibility can be said to be a "hypnotic effect," one among possibly many others. I can easily go from there to the testable notion of there possibly being a linguistic structure that has a like "hypnotic effect." But note that if I do find such structures exist, because of my specific definition of hypnosis, there is no possibility for me of meaningfully speaking of "hypnosis without hypnosis." However, I can still appropriately speak of producing a "hypnotic effect" in the absence of an induction of hypnosis. Now we know that Watzlawick is considered to be of the Ericksonian school of thought and we know that, as a whole, Ericksonians have other ways of looking at hypnosis than I, a so-called "traditional" hypnotherapist, so we need to be open to the possibility that from an Ericksonian viewpoint his "hypnosis without hypnosis" or "hypnotherapy without trance" might after all turn out to be meaningful.

Consider then, for instance, what O'Hanlon and Martin, two Ericksonian hypnotherapists, have to say. According to them "hypnosis is the evocation of involuntary experiences" (O'Hanlon & Martin, 1992, p. 13). Clearly one cannot simultaneously evoke and not evoke involuntary behavior. Although for a different reason than in my case, to speak of "hypnosis without hypnosis" is then also out of the question here. But it is also clearly out of the question to even consider that there could be linguistic structures that would evoke involuntary experiences "in the absence of hypnosis." For by their definition this kind of evocation is the very essence of hypnosis. On the other hand, Gilligan, another Ericksonian, tells us that "hypnosis is an experiential process of communicating ideas" (Gilligan, 1987). To be truthful, I am not quite sure what kind of a distinction he is trying to make by qualifying communications as being "experiential." Also there is a somewhat troublesome implication here that there might be other experiential processes of communication that should not be labeled "hypnosis." Fortunately these matters have no bearing upon what I shall next say, and this is that Gilligan's definition leads to making the same kind of observations as I made in the case of O'Hanlon and Martin. We could look at other Ericksonian definitions but I think that these two examples are sufficient to show that, from a non-Ericksonian as well as an Ericksonian viewpoint, it is far from always being viable to speak of "hypnosis without hypnosis" or of "hypnotherapy without trance induction." We can also see from this

the essentiality of knowing from the start what such expressions as "hypnosis," "hypnotic" and "hypnotic effects" specifically refer to. Without this information we end up by having to deal with essentially semantically empty statements, as we do in Watzlawick's case. Since his presentation and article are apparently the only foundation on which rests the use of the expressions "hypnosis without hypnosis" and "hypnotherapy without trance induction," subsequent usages of these expressions have not been valid either and it is a usage that I strongly advise should be abandoned. At best it says nothing, at worse it is quite misleading.

Part II

Even if it is questionable to speak, directly and indirectly, of "hypnosis without hypnosis" and of "hypnotherapy without trance" it does not follow that strategic therapy and hypnosis could not be related, something that Watzlawick and Malarewicz might have correctly detected but inappropriately stated. This then should be looked into.

Clearly, the list of "language games" provided by Watzlawick is not a list of linguistic structures but is a list of psychotherapeutic "techniques and/or interventions." Many of you will, of course, have recognized this list as partially making up the list of tools that are used in what has come to be called strategic therapy. In themselves they do not constitute language structures anymore than they constitute any kind of therapy. They are simply things one can do and that are recommended because they appear or are believed to be particularly effective in psychotherapy. Certainly they involve a wide use of linguistic structures but, with one possible exception, I must strongly question any notion that the effectiveness of the remainder of these interventions and techniques centers around the use of any particular linguistic structure. If it does, this has never been properly documented. Watzlawick may believe it, but beliefs are not facts.

Whether or not Watzlawick has meant to do this, there is an intimation in his second proposition that the techniques and interventions in question must be seen as having hypnotic properties by virtue of having originated in the course of Erickson doing hypnotherapy and/or otherwise being extensively used in this context. As we shall see presently, some of these procedures may have originated in another context. While hypnotherapy can boil down to the therapist simply giving the patient a brief direct suggestion, in many cases hypnotherapy is a mixture of direct and indirect suggestions, of trance (hypnosis) inductions, and of interventions or techniques that in no way can be said to be "hypnotic" in nature. Such is the case, for instance, of the analysis of the transference by psychoanalysts practicing hypnotherapy. As I pointed out many years ago (Weitzenhoffer, 1972) Erickson and other hypnotherapists were using operant conditioning techniques in the course of doing hypnotherapy well before behavior therapy was recognized as such. The use of a technique or intervention as an adjuvant in therapy using hypnosis must not be confused with the use of hypnotic phenomena. Neither the analysis of the transference or the use of operant conditioning can rightfully be considered to have any relation to hypnosis, its production or its uses simply from the pos-

sibility of using them in a hypnotherapeutic context. Are there any more reasons to think otherwise in the case of strategic therapeutic techniques? I do not think there are.

In further support of what I have just said, let me add that Haley derived his ideas about strategic therapy largely, if not entirely, from his study of Milton H. Erickson's overall clinical work, that is, not just when the latter was doing hypnotherapy proper, but also when Erickson was not making use of hypnotic techniques. Malarewicz himself recognizes (p. 22) that Erickson "had recourse to hypnosis but for only about a third of his patients." Actually estimates have run as low as one-fifth. Where these figures have come from is not clear, since those who have given them never knew Erickson, and certainly did not observe him at work. However, on the basis of my own personal contacts with Erickson and my study of his writings, there is little question in my mind that Erickson did treat many individuals without using hypnosis, but using many of the same "strategies" as he used in association with hypnosis. Godin (1992) has pointed out too that Erickson made use of hypnosis itself as a tool to support some of his strategic interventions, and indeed this may have been how he mainly used it. The fact that Erickson made use of the strategies listed by Watzlawick, as well as other strategies, in the context of doing hypnotherapy simply cannot be taken as demonstrating these strategies have any kind of hypnotic properties, virtual or otherwise. That is, we have as much reason for believing that Erickson used these strategies when doing hypnotherapy, not because they had anything to do with hypnotism per se, but because they were useful and powerful adjuvants for other reasons.

It seems to me that the most direct way of deciding whether or not a relationship exists between doing hypnotherapy and doing strategic therapy is to look at the techniques that are involved and at their potentiality for producing effects that could be construed as specifically belonging to the domain of hypnosis, however we define it. We might then first ask, do any of the techniques regularly produce a trance or hypnotic state? There is no evidence that they do and furthermore there are no reasons to expect they would. This is true even for the confusion technique which was originally offered by Erickson as an induction of hypnosis technique. Can we say they consistently so satisfy definitions of "hypnosis," other than the one whereby it is defined as a special induced condition, as to allow us to make the necessary connection? I do not know of any such definitions for which one can say this is demonstrably so. It would not be practical at this time for us to go down Watzlawick's list, item by item, and check this out. But this I have done and I can tell you that the connection we are looking for cannot be satisfactorily established for any of them.

In brief, there are no grounds for thinking that hypnotism, be it "traditional" or "Ericksonian," is fundamentally involved when one uses strategic therapeutic techniques alone. Certainly not in all instances. Repeated use of any of these techniques in conjunction with the deliberate production of hypnosis by other recognized means might, of course, lead by association to one of these techniques in turn eliciting certain hypnotic phenomena. Likewise, the use of any strategic therapeutic technique by a the-

rapist perceived as being a hypnotherapist by the patient might also result in the technique acquiring the capacity to produce certain hypnotic phenomena. This sort of thing should not be confused with the issue that we have been looking at. That is, there is always a possibility of a person entering a hypnotic state or trance because of redintegration or because of expectancy. In either case, hypnosis will merely be superimposed on strategic therapy.

Part III

Although not in dictionaries, the qualification "hypnotic" has long been used in the English vernacular to denote, among other things, an all-powerful, compelling, irresistible influence. This usage has grown out of popular conceptions, or rather misconceptions, of what hypnotism entails. Is it possible this is what Watzlawick had in mind when he spoke of a linguistic structure having virtually "hypnotic effects?" Possibly, but if this is the case, his propositions are not seriously founded and should not be allowed to dominate our thinking. Furthermore this understanding of a "hypnotic effect" is the very antithesis of the permissiveness which is said to be characteristic of the Ericksonian approach! There are other popular usages of the word "hypnotic," such as, for instance, to denote something "absorbing." Perhaps it is this that Watzlawick has in mind, but without further details from him there is really very little that can be further done with this potential interpretation. In any event a few moments consideration will show you that it does not directly lead to such a notion as doing hypnotherapy without trance induction when one, for instance, uses preempting or makes a pun in the course of doing psychotherapy.

It is also of interest to consider here that, had it been viable for Watzlawick to speak of "hypnotic effects" there was an alternative and more reasonable way of dealing with them. Signs of hypnosis have always played a major role in both the traditional and the Ericksonian approaches to the production and use of hypnotic phenomena. Would it not have been equally reasonable, if not more, to consider the observation of these "hypnotic effects" referred to by Watzlawick as evidence that an induction of hypnosis has taken place, rather than to talk of such effects being present in the absence of such a state?

This last consideration leads me to a last issue that I would like to take up. I am sure that both Watzlawick and Malarewicz believe in the truth of their assertions. But assuming they had been right, what would they have accomplished by telling us that strategic therapy is "hypnosis without hypnosis" or "hypnotherapy without a trance induction?" Clarified for us the nature of "hypnosis" or of "hypnotherapy?" Or would it be that of "strategic therapy?" What did Malarewicz feel he was accomplishing when he added in his title the information that strategic therapy was hypnosis without hypnosis. His main purpose was apparently to write an introductory text on strategic therapy. Would not a title such as "Introduction to strategic therapy" have sufficed? I keep wondering what is the appeal of being able to do hypnosis without doing it, or doing hypnotherapy without doing a trance induction. What are the advantages? Is it a mat-

ter of the patient not knowing that in effect the same thing is happening as would happen with an induction? Isn't there a small matter of ethics here? What happens to informed consent? Or is the issue that there are still many therapists who are afraid of using hypnosis or feel uncomfortable about doing so, but who might be willing to use something that does the same thing but is not hypnosis. To begin with, if the only difference is that no trance induction is performed, I cannot see how that would get around their fear of or discomfort with using hypnosis, unless we assume that in all cases the anxiety centers around doing an induction. Or is it a status or economic matter? Now everyone can claim to be a hypnotist without being one! Frankly I can only speculate on the matter so perhaps it is best I leave it stand as it is. I would, however, make one last remark. I believe that far more than his use of hypnosis, it is the way that Erickson used strategic maneuvers in psychotherapy that made his therapeutic work stand out as it did. As I have mentioned elsewhere (Weitzenhoffer, 1994) the emphasis by his students and followers should be on Ericksonian "therapy" and not on Ericksonian "hypnosis" of "hypnotherapy."

In conclusion, there is no basis for speaking of "hypnosis without hypnosis" or of "hypnotherapy without trance induction." Nor is there any basis for thinking that strategic therapy and hypnotism are related. The various techniques and interventions that make up the whole of strategic therapy most likely are effective, each for different reasons, but having "hypnotic" properties or involving language structures that have "hypnotic" properties, is probably the least of these reasons. From a purely practical standpoint I do not know that it is particularly important for clinicians to know that they are or are not doing "hypnosis without hypnosis" when performing strategic therapy. Why Malarewicz and Watzlawick have felt otherwise is far from clear, but they must have had an idea and, clearly, the subsequent response to at least Watzlawick's paper has shown that his notion had a certain appeal to others. In any case, going back into antiquity, one finds that clinical work and scientific exploration, primitive as the latter may at times have been, have gone on hand in hand to the benefit of both. I do not believe this is the time or place to stop this alliance. It behooves us to inquire into the scientific validity of speaking as Malarewicz and Watzlawick have and to act according to our findings, namely to reject their propositions as not being among the hypnotic realities that Erickson, Rossi and Rossi have written about.

Addendum

Since writing the above my attention has been called to a recent work of Narodne and Watzlawick (1993). This is an excellent introduction to strategic therapy, but one which does not elucidate any further this matter of hypnotizing without hypnotizing. In fact references to hypnosis and trance are few, scarce and uninformative. Likewise with regard to the subject of suggestion. What is most clear is that if "hypnosis" and "suggestion," whatever they may be for Narodne and Watzlawick, are agents involved in the implementation of strategic therapy, as they describe it, they appear to be but one

of many other processes that one can name as being potentially put into action by strategic therapists and that have little to do with hypnosis and suggestion short of radically redefining these concepts to such an extent as to essentially render these terms meaningless.

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Effects of Subliminal Suggestions on Task Performance

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■ *The effects of subliminal auditory suggestions on task performance were studied in 60 subjects. Most of the studies on subliminal perception have been on visual stimulation and to date only a few experiments have been done in the auditory field. There are some unpublished reports mentioned in a book by Swingle (1992) about experiments with a word production and a lever pressing task. The results of these studies provide evidence for an effect of subliminal auditory stimulation. In the present study 60 subjects, randomly assigned to three groups, were told to play a computer game while subliminal auditory suggestions oriented towards enhancement or deterioration were presented. Results showed a significant difference between the two relevant experimental groups. As a covariate, suggestibility was tested with a modified form of the Creative Imagination Scale (Wilson & Barber, 1976).*

Introduction

The existence of the phenomenon of subliminal perception is widely accepted (see, e.g., Dixon, 1981), and a number of reliable effects have been found in the field of visual subliminal stimulation. The effect of auditory stimulation, however, is still disputed. Despite this there is considerable interest in research about auditory subliminal stimulation: This derives partly from the commercial distribution of subliminal audiotapes for selfhelp purposes and their questionable effectiveness. It is asserted that these tapes enhance the ability to achieve certain goals, to solve problems, to improve task performance, and to effect a number of psychological and physiological changes by simply listening to a specific tape regularly. The major hypothesis to explain such an effect is a yet unknown mental process, which allegedly is able to receive and handle subliminal information that is emotionally and motivationally relevant. The information may be masked by music or a noise (e.g., of a waterfall or white noise). After a prolonged time of regular subliminal exposure (one hour daily for 4 weeks, say), the "new" information is supposed to replace "old" information that was responsible for a