Hypnosis

An Emerging Rational Perspective

Hypnosis maximizes the person's ability to concentrate and direct attention to behavioural processes above or below the awareness threshold, and minimizes distractions that inhibit and interfere with learning. At the same time, hypnosis provides a vehicle whereby cortical and subcortical brain functioning can be integrated (Kroger, 1977; Fromm and Schor, 1979; Tosi, 1980). Hilgard (1973) identified four major theories of hypnosis. Sarbin and Coe (1972) posit a social-psychological model. Hypnosis is seen as a specialized social situation, suggesting a person's involvement in role-taking activity based on performance expectations for particular situations (e.g., the mother role).

Similarly, Barber's (1969) perceptual-cognitive theory bases hypnosis on the beliefs, convictions, and expectations of the hypnotic subject. These theorists, de-emphasizing the role of intrapsychic factors in hypnosis, prefer to demystify the phenomenon on by using a more parsimonious social-psychological explanation. Gill and Brenman's (1959) psychoanalytic theory defines hypnosis as a regressed ego state in which there are changes from conscious perception and awareness to preconscious or unconscious states. In the same vein, Orne (1967), Shor (1959), and Fromm (1978) postulate a trance or altered state of consciousness theory.

Hilgard concluded that each theory accepted the same facts, while using different labels, and that the issues could be resolved through debate and by new data as it became available. As this occurs, a more rational model of hypnosis emerges. When ego psychologists define hypnosis as a regressed ego state, they generally mean that human beings are capable of reflecting on experiences that they become aware of through activation of memories of experiences recorded in the stream of consciousness. Cognitive processes can then operate on such information that may not have previously been in the person's awareness, if only to explore the relevance of experiences to some present situation or future projection.

Erika Fromm summarizes the ego-analytic theory of hypnosis: In hypnosis, ego activity in the sense of reality perception and the making of choices is diminish, but not fully abolished. There is greater suggestibility. What is suggestibility in ego psychological terms? I conceive of it as a form of ego receptivity. The ego in hypnosis is particularly receptive to stimuli corning from within or from without and it lets them influence imagery, thoughts, behavioural action and feelings even if they do not conform to the laws of secondary process logic. For instance, in an age regression a subject may experience himself as a little boy or girl of five playing. However, because in hypnosis critical judgmental and reality-oriented faculties of the ego are to a great degree temporarily excluded from functioning, the perceived coexistence of the adult and the child is not judged by the hypnotized subject to be absurd or illogical. The subject operates based on a special logic trance logic (Orne, 1959) which is comparable to dream logic as described by French and Fromm (1964). No difference exists for him between fantasy, imagery and actual reality. The imagery has reality for him as it does for the young child in the waking state. Cognition for a hypnotized subject organized much more along the lines of primary process, as in a young child. (Fromm and Schor, 1979, p 93)

The higher cortical functions operate quite effectively and efficiently while a person is in a hypnotic state. We that believe this permits a person to achieve a more expanded orientation to
reality that considers both objective and subjective facts and their interrelationships. This view will become more evident in the example of cognitive-experiential theory (RSDH) provided later.

The cognitive experiential model (RSDH) views hypnosis as a naturally occurring phenomenon that may be self-induced or other-induced depending on the degree to which a person is receptive, suggestible, or willing to explore the possibilities of the functions of the mind in either a systematic or a non-systematic fashion. Hypnosis largely characterized by concentration, focused awareness, reflective thought, relaxation, and selective attention and inattention. Any of these processes can be directed toward or away from information or facts existing in the person and environment.

Trance phenomena develop during moments of concentrated attention such as when attention is fixed on a narrow range of matters which have great meaning or interest. At any moment during a treatment session, the client is engaged in a "generalized reality orientation" (Shor, 1959) or is in some stage of developing trance phenomena. Generalized reality orientation is a maintaining of the status quo. The client's limited conscious frame of reference is engaged in interpreting events on the social, psychological and biological levels. Only at the point of dissociation from that state does therapeutic change have the greatest potential to take place. Erickson, Rossi, and Rossi (1976) defined hypnotic phenomena as the dissociation of any behaviour from its usual context. Since the client does not continue to hold the habitual notion of restrictive choices, hypnotic phenomena can provide the opportunity for the client to experience the possibility of change: to create vivid sensory experiences when not asleep (positive hallucination), to feel pride in success before a project is complete (pseudo-orientation in time), to relive a past event as though it were today (age regression), to recall a forgotten memory (hypermnesia), to lose an unwanted sensation (anesthesia).

When conscious attention is fixed and role-taking behaviour is unconsciously directed in this way, the therapist has the opportunity to influence change through the association of phrases or images (indirect suggestions). At the same time, the client has increased attention to his own newly formed associations, which can then surface to awareness.

The objective of psychotherapy is not to elicit superficial other-responsive behaviour but to provide the context within which the client can reorganize his or her inner reality sufficiently to better meet the requirements of external life. Trance phenomena are the tools, which enhance and utilize internal experience toward the meeting of therapeutic goals.