

Hypnosis in Psychology

Throughout the history of this country, hypnosis has been dismissed as a form of gimmickry. Contrary to this, for centuries numerous cultures have used hypnosis as a means of mental and spiritual healing. Hypnosis is defined as an induced trance-like state in which one is highly susceptible to suggestions, or commands. There are three commonly known methods of hypnosis. Two of which, the authoritarian and standardized approaches, are generally considered non-beneficial towards the subject. Meanwhile the utilization approach, primarily developed by Dr. Milton H. Erickson, is the most widely used amongst psychologists today. The authoritarian approach focuses primarily on the power of the hypnotist over his/her subject. The out-dated though still used, standardized approach, is rather limited due to the fact that it considers a person either hypnotizable or not. In contrast to the authoritarian and standardized approaches, the utilization approach, stresses the interaction nature of the hypnotic relationship. These approaches have many dissimilarities and thus are utilized for different practices.

The authoritarian approach emphasizes the power of the hypnotist. This approach, spawned by Mesmer and others, is still widely exploited by stage hypnotists and is consequently often the conceptualization held by the unformed lay person. Even many trained physicians implicitly adhere to this view, which in it's extreme form involves some powerful and charismatic hypnotist exercising some strange power over a hapless and weak-willed subject. In essence, the hypnotist gets the subject to do something he or she wouldn't ordinarily do such as stop smoking or bark like a dog. This approach generally assumes that the unconscious is some passive vehicle into which suggestions are placed. This approach is one which is viewed as limited in value. It is also believed that the unconscious is mistreated or abused. Because of its authoritative manner, this approach is considered ineffective.

Many people realized these limitations and subsequently developed what might be called the standardized approach. The standardized approach generally assumes that hypnotic responsiveness is determined by some inherent trait or ability of the subject. There is nothing inherently worn with this approach, especially in a research setting, where sometimes it is required. However it doesn't work very well for all of subjects, especially those displaying abnormal behavior.

The utilization approach assumes that each person is unique in terms of strategies used to create his/her trance and, consequently the hypnotist's effectiveness depends upon how well he/she is able to adapt his/her basic strategies to those of a given subject. Thus standardized methods are not used. The approach further assumes that unconscious processes can operate in an intelligent and creative fashion and that people have stored in their unconscious all the resources necessary to attain this "trance".

The question thus becomes: How does the hypnotist bring the subject under trance? Instead of standardized techniques, he/she has to use general principles to guide his/her efforts. There are three defined parts of the utilization approach: 1) accept and utilize the clients reality, 2) pace and lead the subject's behavior and 3) interpret "resistance" as lack of pacing.

The first principle-accept and utilize-was stressed again and again by Erickson and is the essential theme of Erickson and Rossi's Hypnotherapy (1979). Briefly stated, accepting means assuming and communicating to the subject that "what you're doing at this point in time is exactly what I'd like you to be doing. It's fine; it's perfect." Utilizing means assuming and communicating the attitude

that "what you're doing right now is exactly that which will allow you to do X." The process of accepting and utilizing is one communicating that what the subject is doing is fine and it will allow him/her to do something else (like enter a trance). Bandler and Grinder (1975) discussed these principles in the more process-oriented terms of pacing and leading the subject's behavior.

Pacing communications essentially feed back the subject's experience; they add nothing new. The major intent is to gain trust from the subject, as well as attention. This enables the subject to be more trustful and cooperative and the hypnotist to be more understanding. Once trust has been gained the hypnotist can lead by introducing behaviors that are different from, but consistent with, the subject's present state and slightly closer to the desired state (e.g., trance). According to the principle of Ericksonian teachings, the effective hypnotist assumes all experience is valid and utilizable and paces and leads to the desired state. The one thing the hypnotist must remember is that everything the patient is doing, the hypnotist wants him to do. There is no resistance, the hypnotist must adapt to the subject's state of mind, actions and reactions.

The three approaches to hypnosis differ in many ways. There is the authoritarian approach, which is used by stage performers and beginners. Also there is the standardized approach which although slightly advanced, still seems to be prejudiced towards subjects that are harder to bring into trance. Then Dr. Milton Erickson pioneered the hypnosis of the future. A form of hypnosis that would adapt to everyone. Erickson's approach was far harder on the hypnotist, because it is not learned as a pragmatic routine, it is learned as a style that each hypnotist develops within himself. This is good and bad in some ways. It is good in that it calls upon the hypnotist's creativity, which is the key to discovering new techniques and approaches. It is bad for the hypnotist who has very little creativity. The standardized approach would be better for hypnotists with little creativity, while the utilization approach would be better for hypnotists with a great deal of creativity. As a society we have looked lowly upon hypnosis as a treatment, and its effects are being lost to stage performers. In my opinion hypnosis offers us a direct path to the unconscious mind; and in the unconscious mind anything is possible.