HYPNOTHERAPY AND THE HUMANISTIC

by

John Rowan

At first I thought there was no connection between the various forms of hypnotherapy, on the one hand, and humanistic psychology on the other. I was quite critical of the way in which hypnotherapy so often seems to offer quick and shallow training and quick and shallow treatment, and I really thought I could dismiss it from my mind. When I made out comparative lists of different forms of psychotherapy, hypnotherapy was not even on the list.

But then I started working on a book on subpersonalities - those inner people who affect our lives in so many ways, for good and ill. I wrote about the Parent, Adult and Child ego states of Eric Berne, and showed that these were subpersonalities; I wrote about the autonomous complexes of Jung and showed that these were subpersonalities; I wrote about the topdog and underdog in the Gestalt therapy of Fritz Perls and showed that these, too, were subpersonalities. As I went on, the field seemed to get bigger and bigger; I found no less than twenty-five different synonyms for subpersonalities. And then I discovered Ellenberger.

Henri Ellenberger, back in 1970, wrote a fat and magisterial book called 'The Discovery of the Unconscious'. In this book he gives the whole history of the way in which the unconscious mind was first thought of, and how it was first investigated. And it turned out that the history of the modern study of the unconscious, for the first hundred and fifty years of its existence, is the history of hypnosis.

Most primitive cultures, both ancient and modern, have been aware of altered states of consciousness and spirit possession, both of which are forerunners of the modern idea of hypnosis. Priests, witch doctors, and shamans have made these ideas a stock in trade since early in the history of the human race. There were 'sleep temples' in ancient Greece and in Egypt where patients were encouraged to go into altered states of consciousness, were actually hypnotized or were talked to during their sleep and given curative suggestions. The Druids, the Celtic priesthood, are supposed to have been experts in the use of these methods. In primitive cultures, these changes have often

been brought about through the use of trances, and trance induction has been brought about by means of rhythm, drums, dancing, chanting, etc.

More dramatic, of course, is the idea of spirit possession. For centuries this was the only way of explaining how someone could be 'taken over' by another spirit, another personality. In possession the appearance of the person could change, the voice could change, and the whole emotional range of the person would extend. This is just a dramatic illustration of the fact that there are potentials within us which can come out and be personified, and the first people to explore this whole area in detail were the hypnotists, who at first were called mesmerists or magnetizers.

We can even pinpoint a year (1784) when the idea of the unconscious came into the sphere of psychology, through the work of the Comte de Puységur, who lived at the same time as Mesmer (Chertok & de Saussure 1979). In the nineteenth century the thing grew and grew, and by the end of the century hypnosis had acquired great respectability, being used at the great mental hospitals of the time. All through the 1890's Charcot and Janet and their colleagues were working on the problems of hysteria, and linking them with the phenomenon of hypnosis. And of course here came the link with Freud, who learned hypnosis from Charcot and also got from Charcot the idea that sexuality was the important thing to look for in the origins of neurosis.

But around 1910, Ellenberger tells us, the whole thing collapsed. Freud had gone off hypnosis and now said it was not the answer; the rising tide of behaviourism had no use for hypnosis; even the new schools just arising, like Gestalt psychology, had no use for hypnosis. It was said that hypnotists did not understand the transference and were basically just seducing their patients and kidding themselves in one way or another.

Hypnotism went underground, and mainly surfaced in stage demonstrations and the unsung work of a few dentists and doctors who still found it useful as a pain-killer. Otherwise it seemed only to exist in the advertising columns of sleazy magazines, offering miraculous cures to gullible people.

But what I then found was that there is a modern revival of hypnotism which is far from this image. This is partly through the work of a master clinician, Milton Erickson, partly through the work of a very find researcher, Ernest Hilgard, and partly through the rethinking of a few people like Lewis Wolberg, John Beahrs and John and Helen Watkins.

Hypnotherapy

When I started on this book, I knew nothing about hypnotherapy. But the more I went into it, the more I found I had to go into hypnotherapy and find out more about it. And it turns out, as we saw earlier, that the whole of psychotherapy comes out of the tradition initiated by Mesmer, de Puységur, Liebault, Bernheim, Janet, Charcot and research on subpersonalities has

been done in the hypnotic tradition, as Hilgard (1986) has demonstrated with a wealth of detail. He mentions that a whole issue of the **International Journal** off **Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis** was devoted to evidence and issues related to the kind of thing we are interested in here (April 1984, Vol 32 No 2) And it also turns out that much of the best thinking about subpersonalities comes from hypnotherapy.

The stunning book by Beahrs (1982), which I only discovered recently, gives a practical and also a philosophical rationale for working with subpersonalities, and in it the author gives a great deal of information about other people in the hypnotic tradition who have made interesting and useful contributions in this area. He has himself done a great deal of work with subpersonalities, and agrees with others that:

> Our goal is not to be 'rid' of a psychological process, but to shift it from the harmful or maladaptive ('Pathological') dimension to where it is useful in its effect, so that what was once a symptom can truly become a skill (p 82)

He takes the same position as we have already mentioned above, that mood changes, altered states of consciousness, subpersonalities and multiple personality are points on a continuum of dissociation, with the boundaries becoming thicker and more marked as we go along that line. And he agrees with another of our positions:

> I consider dissociation to be essential for healthy functioning; in addition, I believe that it is a creative act. Kohut (1971) has taken the same position regarding vertical splitting, which I use almost synonymously with dissociation. Everyday examples of creative dissociating are dreams and fantasies, roles and specific skills, imaginary playmates, projection of both positive and negative aspects of the self on to others, selective amnesia for stimuli, and virtually any defence function . In each, an aspect of overall mental function is put in relief by dissociation in a way that enhances one's power for action (p.85)

Another point which was new to me comes from the work of Allison (Allison & Schwartz 1980), who classifies subpersonalities into three categories - persecutors, rescuers and internal self-helpers. The first two of these are relatively familiar, but the internal self-helpers were new to me. According to Allison, they have characteristics differing from pathologial subpersonalities and are a great potential resource in treatment.

In his view, they differ in having (1) no identifiable time and reason for their formation; (2) no defensive function; and (3) far more accuracy of perception, to the point of being 'incapable of transference' and able to tell a therapist all his mistakes. (Beahrs 1982 p 109)

This is fascinating if true, and certainly something worth looking out for and exploring in more detail. It reminds me of the important idea of Langs (1982) that the unconscious of the patient is often very accurate about the unconscious of the therapist.

More recently, Karle & Boys (1987) have given an interesting example of one way in which early child abuse can be handled. This is of course just the kind of trauma which has been found to be implicated in many cases of multiple personality. The client was a middle-aged woman who had been sexually abused by her father:

She was asked to return in hypnosis to the time her father had molested her sexually, and simultaneously to observe the scene as her adult self. The scene was played out without the therapist intervening, up to the moment at which the child was ordered to her room. At this moment, the therapist asked the patient to enter the scene in her adult self, meet her child self on the stairs, pick her up, comfort and reassure her, and generally to act as she would to any child in such a situation. She was to continue in this fashion until the child was wholly reassured and at peace, and then to return to the present day. The patient reported successful performance of the task in terms of the child's restored equanimity. Perhaps more important was the feeling that she could recognize in her adult self that her child self . . . was in fact innocent . . . (pp 250-251)

Whether the client needed to be hypnotized to do this work is a moot point, and I personally would not take it for granted that this would be so. But certainly it is an approach which fits very well with the hypnotic tradition.

In general, work with subpersonalities is no more common in hypnotherapy than it is in other modalities. But John and Helen Watkins are two people who have taken this approach a very long way, and have developed a whole therapy, which they call ego-state therapy, which is becoming quite popular and well-known. Like the work of Berne and Shapiro, it is based on the theorising of Paul Federn (1952), and shares the same terminology. Their definition of the ego state runs as follows:

> An ego state is an organized system of behaviour and experience whose elements are bound together by some common principle but which is separated from other such states by boundaries that are more or less permeable. (Watkins & Watkins 1986 p 145)

They make many of the same points that others have also made in this field, but add some interesting ideas such as the thought that working with ego states is like a kind of family therapy. This is, I feel, a very fruitful thought, and it seems worth while to look at the way they put it:

> Ego-state therapy is the utilization of family and group treatment techniques for the resolution of conflicts between

> the different ego states that constitute a 'family of self' within a single individual. (Watkins & Watkins 1986 p 149)

They give the example of a student who could not study successfully, A strong ego state close to consciousness wanted him to study and was very upset when he could not do so. However, another ego state, identified as a four-year-old child, wanted more play and less study, and refused to let the student study unless he was treated better. The therapist made friends with the child, and persuaded him to play at night, thus permitting the student to study during the day.

> A week later Ed returned in great delight reporting that he had studied well during the past week and had gotten an A on his foreign language examination. He wondered, though, why he was having such vivid dreams and 'in technicolor' every night. (Watkins & Watkins 1936 p 150)

It turned out that the child had kept his agreement and was playing at night. The student was not aware of this ego state until the therapist informed him about it afterwards.

So this is very interesting work, and I have acquired a new respect for at least some aspects of hypnotherapy since coming across it.

References

Beahrs J O (1982) Unity and Multiplicity: Multilevel Consciousness of Self in Hypnosis, Psychiatric Disorder and Mental Health. Brunner/Mazel New York

Chertok L & de Saussure R (1979) The Therapeutic Revolution: From Mesmer to Freud. Brunner/Mazel, New York.

EHenberger H (1970) The Discovery of the Unconscious. Basic Books, New York.

Hilgard E R (1986) Divided Consciousness: Multiple Controls in Human Thought and Action (Expanded edition) John Wiley, New York.

Karle H W A & Boys J H (1987) Hypnotherapy: a Practical Handbook. Free Association Books, London.

Kohut H (1971) The Analysis of the Self. International Universities Press, New York.

Watkins J G & Watkins HH (1986) Hypnosis, Multiple Personality and Ego States as Altered States of Consciousness' in B B Wolman & M Ullman (eds) Handbook of States of Consciousness. Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York.
