

Therapy: Legitimate Hypnosis

by Dominick Hankle

Have you ever wondered why psychotherapy works? Have you wondered which therapist is the best? Maybe you practice one particular theory such as Gestalt, Adlerian, or Psychoanalytical therapy. Which is the best? Why does going to talk with someone actually help you solve your problems? These are very good questions. The answers vary among different studies, however most studies recognize one common factor as having the greatest impact on how well a client does in therapy.

That factor is traditionally called the therapeutic alliance. In layman's terms, it's the relationship between the client and the therapist. If there is rapport (something NLP folks know well) there is most likely going to be some form of change.

Because therapy seems to have this mysterious positive effect without any strong evidence to support why one theory works better than another, I've often wondered why hypnosis is overlooked by the established counseling community as a viable therapy. After all, it works. It's as successful as any other method employed by other theorists. Yes, thanks to the work of some great therapists like Milton Erickson hypnosis is more acceptable than in the past, yet it still seems to have the mystique of new age mumbo-jumbo keeping some serious professionals away from its use. Thanks to NLP, hypnosis is being viewed differently. NLP has in many ways legitimized hypnosis by emphasizing the communication element of the phenomena. Thanks to this approach, more and more people are looking at hypnosis as a more natural interaction involved in every day communication with one another. I believe it was John Grinder who said that, "All communication is hypnosis."

Since its discovery, people have been trying to define hypnosis. Bill O'Connell, an instructor and practicing hypnotist, wrote a wonderful article in the December 2001 edition of the *Journal of Hypnotism* showing how difficult hypnosis is to nail down. He concludes, "While a clear definition of what hypno-

sis is remains elusive, equally illusive is a clear understanding of how hypnosis works.” Doesn’t that sound familiar? Psychotherapy has yet to define exactly how or why it works. There are a number of theories describing how change occurs, but most theorists are hard pressed to provide empirical evidence identifying the unique factor making their theory effective. Another interesting element hypnosis and psychotherapy share is how resistance (the unwillingness of the client to cooperate with the therapist) significantly decreases the chances for success. All this leads me to believe that therapy is nothing more than another form of hypnosis.

By now, any purist in a particular psychotherapeutic theory is ready to kill me. How can I make such a claim? I make that claim for two reasons. First, I’m not a “State” or “Traditional” hypnotic theorist. I don’t believe a significant amount of evidence has been amassed proving hypnosis is a unique state different than a number of other states we experience as human beings. Therefore, I’m often referred to as a “Non-state” theorist or as Michael Yapko calls it in his book *Essentials of Hypnosis* one who uses a “Naturistic Hypnotic Induction Method.” John Grinder and Richard Bandler often used these types of inductions. It simply means through the use of a person’s innate ability to move in and out of different states they can become more suggestible and able to facilitate subconscious changes. The clinician’s job is to recognize when the client has moved into these states and how to guide them and use them. Simple clinical interaction is the catalyst to the “induction” of hypnosis, not the swinging of a pendulum.

Because non-state theorists see hypnosis as a naturally occurring phenomenon, we look at the social exchange in therapy and find some very common elements in both. This is the second reason I make my claim. When you see these common elements you have to agree

with John Grinder that all communication is hypnosis. Given that therapy is largely about communication, I would add that all therapy is hypnosis. Here are some of the common elements found in all the different theories of psychotherapy and hypnosis that demonstrate they are in large the same thing.

Initial Contact

For hypnosis and therapy to be effective, both acknowledge that the initial contact between therapist and client is important. Rapport is built and the client begins to believe this is someone who can understand and help them facilitate change. It’s important that the client in therapy *believe* they can be helped. In hypnosis, the client must *believe* they can be helped as well. Belief seems to be the element allowing the therapist’s suggestions to sink into the unconscious mind. If this initial contact fails to stimulate belief, it becomes difficult for the client to make lasting change.

Power of the Therapist

In the context of power, the therapist in hypnosis and in psychotherapy is viewed as a person having authority. Neither hypnosis nor any of the theoretical orientations in psychotherapy believe the therapist has acquired power on his own. What’s important, is the client has handed over power to the therapist by believing him or her to hold a special place in the relationship. This place of authority is what allows the therapist to make suggestions the client is willing to accept.

Feeling Accepted

In hypnosis, there's always the underlying fear that the client will reveal some secret of theirs to the therapist. Although anyone working with hypnosis understands that this

is not possible, if a client does not feel accepted they have a difficult time letting go and allowing themselves to be directed by the hypnotist. There's this fear they will be seen as strange or odd. In therapy, acceptance is one of the greatest tools to bypass resistance. If a client feels accepted hypnosis and therapy are able to get directly into a client's unconscious and work on the changes that would have been normally resisted.

Expectations

NLP has shown that expectation is extremely important in achieving results, and therapy and hypnosis share this characteristic as well. Often a therapist will sit down with a client and ask them what they expect therapy to be like, what they expect to achieve in the sessions that follow, and if they have any reservations or questions they would like answered. In hypnosis, one of the first things any good hypnotist does is ask a client if they have ever been hypnotized before, if so what was it like, and if not what do they expect to happen? This is done so the hypnotist can clear up any misconceptions the client may have. It also helps him structure the session in a way that is familiar to the client thus helping them feel they are being hypnotized (this helps the client with belief). Finally, if a client expects changes, there is the old adage that belief will become a self-fulfilling prophecy and change will occur. Many solution-focused approaches to therapy work this way. It helps the counselor orient himself to the client's reality and then lead them to a new experience allowing for change. We do the same thing in hypnosis. They give us an idea of what they expect to happen. We start there leading them into the experience and responses we want hoping this will facilitate lasting change.

Methods of Suggestion

In hypnosis, suggestion is all about communication. A hypnotist structures his suggestions either directly or indirectly depending on how the client is reacting and the result the hypnotist is trying to achieve. He may use positive suggestion asking the client to feel something in particular or negative suggestion asking them not to feel something. Content suggestions are used to give specific direction such as, "You feel your arm getting heavier," or a hypnotist may employ context suggestions keeping things vague like "you sense a feeling of lightness in a particular part of your body." Through the different uses of language a hypnotist is skilled in integrating suggestions into the mind of the client so the client will experience a different version of reality. Therefore someone who sees smoking as a way to relax is shown that smoking is actually causing their heart to work harder, their nerves to react to the nicotine, and their body to be more active. By suggesting that the client be aware of these sensations, they may no longer associate relaxation with smoking. All this is done by suggestion. Therapists do the same thing. By suggesting a client experience something differently or think about something differently the therapist is hoping for a shift in reality (in therapy this is called re-framing).

Conclusions

The above is a short list describing some common elements of hypnosis and therapy. There are many more connections that can be made. How often has a Gestalt therapist suggested their clients talk to an empty chair and tell the person they see how they're feeling? (Isn't this the use of imagination and suggestion?) So the clients can project their feelings and emotions onto the therapist, why is it important for psychoanalysts to remain somewhat anonymous to their clients? Psychoanalysts try

very hard to have the client transfer their thoughts about people in the past to the analyst (a phenomenon known as transference.) Carl Rogers in his theory of Person Centered Psychology believes in establishing strong rapport with the client and drawing on their internal strengths to solve their problems similarly to how a hypnotist uses the internal reality of the client to discover solutions to their problems. Lastly, Adlerian psychologists ask their clients to act “as if” they’ve acquired the characteristic or behavior they need to resolve their issues much like hypnosis uses imagination to create change.

Basically, hypnosis and therapy depend on a number of common factors. There must be trust and rapport established between therapist and client. There needs to be a strong belief in the process and the results desired. The therapist/hypnotist must utilize the client's imagination and be skilled at making appropriate suggestions that last. And finally, the use of communication to set expectations, build rapport, and create the suggestions is essential.

So if we believe as John Grinder stated that all communication is hypnosis, I am inclined to say that most all therapy is hypnosis. Sure, many experts will say that hypnosis is only an element or intervention to be used in therapy, but I don't think so. That's like saying NLP is a theoretical orientation. NLP is a model of communication. Therefore, in my humble opinion, it transcends theories. Hypnosis is communication using suggestion to elicit compliance. Isn't therapy the same thing? So, even if hypnosis is still seen in the light of the mystics and shamans, there are those of us ready to move it into the world of communication. I don't think hypnosis is waiting to be legitimized, it already is, and we call it therapy.

About the Author

Dominick Hankle is completing his graduate studies at Duquesne University in the Counselor Education Department. He is a Certified Hypnotherapist registered with the American Board of Hypnotherapy. He is currently the president of The Center for Human Growth and Development which specializes in life coaching and hypnotherapy. He can be reached for comment via e-mail at dhankle@peoplepc.com.