HYPNOTIC SEMINAR

Jay Haley

United States International University, San Diego, California, USA

Abstract: In this transcription of a lecture given in 2000, Jay Haley begins by answering the question, “What is hypnosis?” Haley reviews the circumstances of Gregory Bateson encouraging him to meet with Milton Erickson to discuss the history of hypnosis and the paradoxical nature of trance induction. Haley expresses many original thoughts about multiple personalities, regression to past lives, and how to handle memories that historically may be false. Sophisticated and subtle, this is Haley at his best.

In this seminar lecture from 2000, which took place in San Diego, Jay Haley made some general observations about hypnosis and discussed his own experience, particularly with Milton H. Erickson. The lecture preceded Haley’s comments during a film he showed of an induction by Erickson. He saw Erickson as representing a turning point in beliefs about hypnosis, which both men regarded as a form of human communication.

—Madeleine Richeport-Haley

I should begin by answering the question, “What is hypnosis?” We see two people talking together, and then one often falls asleep or has a hallucination or lifts a hand involuntarily. How can we explain this? I think it is a mystery still to be explained. In a way it is like electricity. We know how to use it in practical ways, but most of us are not very good at explaining its nature.

Let me begin by discussing my first experience with hypnosis when I attended a hypnotic workshop back in the 1950s, the decade in which everything changed. I was on a research project on communication with Gregory Bateson. A weekend hypnotic workshop took place in San Francisco. In those days the only way you could learn hypnosis was at such a workshop because hypnosis was not officially approved. I asked Bateson if I could take the workshop to study hypnotic communication. He asked who was giving it, and I said it was someone named Milton Erickson. Bateson said he would call him and ask if I could attend. That
Two incidents happened that made me want to study hypnosis as a major interest and, in fact, were experiences that changed my life. At the workshop there were about 20 or 30 people. After delivering a lecture, Erickson said he would like to demonstrate hypnotic induction, adding that “I’m sure there is someone out there who wants to volunteer as a subject.” At that moment the muscles of my thigh twisted involuntarily. I found myself being pulled up out of my seat. A man in front of me stood up and became the subject. I was impressed with that involuntary movement.

Another communication impressed me in that situation. After Bateson had talked to Erickson and arranged that I go to the workshop, he hung up the phone and said, “That man is going to manipulate me to come to San Francisco and have dinner with him.” I was curious about manipulation and asked what Erickson had said. Bateson replied, “He said why don’t you come to San Francisco and have dinner with me?” Many people were afraid of Erickson, even though he was kindly. The reputation of hypnosis as related to power followed him. I learned at that workshop that one of the most central questions in human life is “How much power will I allow someone to have over me?” Hypnosis explores that issue.

John Weakland and I wanted to investigate hypnosis and needed to gain experience with it. We set up hypnotic evenings once a week and invited anyone to attend that wanted experience as a hypnotist or a subject. A variety of people came to have the hypnotic experience, and we were able to gather experience with many subjects. We mainly learned and did the ritual inductions that were popular at the time. For those of you who might want to set up hypnotic evenings, you can learn a lot and have no problems if you don’t try to change people. Despite the variety of issues and people who came for those evenings, we had no bad experiences. As we explored hypnosis, Weakland and I began to visit Erickson to learn more about his approach. We found that he often did not follow ritual procedures but designed an induction for each occurrence, just as he did for therapy.

At that time I began to believe there were at least three different kinds of hypnosis with different theories and techniques, which confused the definition. There is self-hypnosis, in which the focus is upon the individual, who influences the self with meditation or other solitary behavior. There is research hypnosis, which focuses on what can be learned about the experiences. Can one expand human skills or find limits when doing research on hypnosis? Can one have anesthesia or color blindness, or hallucinate or follow posthypnotic suggestions, and so on? A third kind of hypnosis is clinical hypnosis, which is used to
change someone. I found that to be a quite different set of ideas and procedures.

I recall that when I went into practice I was experienced with research hypnosis and had been teaching hypnosis for a period of time, but I did not know how to change a person with hypnosis. That is when I began to travel regularly to Phoenix to consult Erickson about cases. I learned that times were changing, and hypnosis was being defined in new ways.

It seems to me that hypnosis used for therapy tends to pick up the ideology of the time. When the field was psychodynamic, so was hypnosis. When the behavioral approach was emphasized, conditioning procedures were used in hypnosis. In the 1950s, when so many things changed, hypnotism was psychodynamic. A typical procedure was regressing a client back in time to recover childhood traumas on the assumption that awareness would change symptoms. Freud had popularized that idea, and it became hypnoanalysis.

The unit of study tended to change with the different ideas. With self-hypnosis, the unit is one person having an inner experience. With research hypnosis the unit is usually two people, one influencing the other. Less common was conceptualizing the unit of three people as part of hypnosis. Some people hypnotize couples or whole families. Sometimes one can observe a wife being a different subject when her husband is or is not in the waiting room.

Let me give a more extreme example. Erickson was doing a demonstration one year in San Francisco with about 100 people. He asked for a volunteer to demonstrate resistance so he could show how to deal with that. (It was a curious request for a person to cooperate by coming forward and then resisting.) A young man came up and stood in front of Erickson, who merely stared at him. The young man went into a trance. Later I asked Erickson how he hypnotized that young man. He said, “I didn’t.” When I replied that “I saw him go into a trance right there,” Erickson said, “I didn’t do anything. That young man came up in front of all those people, and somebody had to do something. I wasn’t doing anything. So he had to go into a trance.” That could be defined as a three-person induction if we include the audience as a third participant in the trance.

There was a shift from ritual induction of a trance to hypnosis as communication when two people were included in the induction. For example, hypnosis had been made up of standardized inductions that involved the framework of sleep and relaxation. This was said to be required to put someone into a trance. One would relax the subjects or suggest they go deeply asleep or float on a cloud. Essentially it was a reduction of sensory input to the subject. Even opening the eyes when being inducted was a bit revolutionary. Sleep and relaxation were the key words, thanks to Braid.
Then Erickson came along. By his nature he was an explorer and experimenter. He demonstrated that a subject could be hypnotized while moving about, so sleep was not the essential aspect of hypnosis. He could hypnotize people without their knowing it was happening, so they went into a trance out of awareness. He demonstrated that he could hypnotize a woman who did not speak English and whose language he did not speak. He could hypnotize one person by having her observe another person go into trance. He would hypnotize someone in a group while giving a lecture like this one. What happened to hypnosis as sleep?

Let me clarify the issue. A man came to Erickson who was so anxious he could not sit down in the office. He wanted to be hypnotized, but he could not stop moving about and so could not relax and sleep. Erickson asked him if he would mind pacing about the room. The man said he could not stop pacing. Erickson asked if he could partly direct the pacing. The man said he could. Erickson said, “I’d like you to pace over by that chair, and then over to the corner. Next go to that wall.” Step by step Erickson directed the pacing, and the man began to hesitate, waiting for the directive. Then Erickson said, “You can move over by that chair, where you will eventually sit,” and the man ultimately did so. He continued to develop a trance and then sat down in the chair. Sleep and relaxation were not part of the induction.

What was the theory of the induction? Let me suggest a communication point of view. If one views the subject and the hypnotist as a dyad, clearly they are having a communication interchange, not just a monologue induction. There is a communication with two steps. The hypnotist first asks the subject to do something voluntarily and then asks for involuntary behavior. The hypnotist asks the subject to sit back in the chair and then asks for relaxation or sleep, which is involuntary behavior. The hypnotist asks for the subject to put his hand on his knee, which is voluntary, and then asks for the hand to lift up by itself, which is involuntary. If the subject lifts the hand voluntarily, the hypnotist corrects him and says the hand is to lift by itself. That is, it must be spontaneous. Yet, isn’t it paradoxical to direct someone to behave spontaneously? Could that be the essential aspect of hypnosis and therapy? In therapy we don’t wish a deliberate change. We want the client to change spontaneously, not to do so because we tell him to.

There is also dealing with resistance. If the hypnotist asks for the hand to become involuntarily lighter and lift up, the subject might say, “My hand is getting heavier.” The hypnotist does not say, “Cut that out,” he says “That’s fine, your hand can get heavier yet.” Resistance is defined as cooperation. How can one resist?

When one observes an induction in this framework, it becomes clear that hypnotic dialogue is rather strange and paradoxical. The hypnotist says to the subject, “Do as I say, but don’t do as I say” (let it be
involuntary). The subject responds by saying, “I’m doing what you say, but I’m not doing what you say (since it is involuntary). The result is that one or both of the two people begin to behave strangely and have unusual personal experiences.

I understood more about Erickson’s therapy when I realized that he treated a symptom as he treated hypnotic resistance. If a client could not stop washing her hands, Erickson would encourage her to wash her hands, just as if she resisted a hypnotic suggestion he would encourage that behavior.

There is another paradoxical communication that occurs in most hypnotic inductions. At some point there is the “challenge,” which occurs when the hypnotist asks the subject to try not to respond in some way, such as “Be unable to lift your hand. Try hard to lift it and find that you can’t move it.” If the subject tries and fails, the implicit agreement is that the hypnotist is in charge. The challenge is paradoxical in that the hypnotist is asking the subject to cooperate by failing to respond.

One of the more interesting aspects of hypnosis is training. In the nineteenth century, clinical hypnosis, and perhaps all therapy, was taught by live supervision. The teacher would demonstrate with a client how to do an induction. The trainee would observe and then work with a client while the teacher observed. Hypnosis was taught as a skill. When Freud gave up hypnosis, he also gave up live supervision and therapy became confidential. The teacher could only guess what actually might have happened in therapy or hypnosis interviews. During the rapid change in the 1950s, live supervision came back with the one-way mirror and videotape. A supervisor could observe an interview from behind the mirror and telephone suggestions to the trainee. This is typically done with family therapy, but I have guided hypnosis students behind a mirror, as well as in live supervision. The telephone message is not used when someone is in a trance.

An even greater change occurred in the 1950s when people began to give directives to clients. Up until then, no directives were allowed in those psychodynamic days. The therapist could not tell a client what to do. In fact, people took pride in being nondirective. Directing a client, such as telling him what to do, began to be legitimate at that time. But it was found that there was no training in how to do that. Supervisors did not know how to teach a trainee to motivate a client to do something or how to phrase a directive. They argued it should not be done. The exception was hypnosis. By its nature, hypnosis involves telling someone what to do. Anyone trained in hypnosis knew how to motivate clients, how to phrase a directive so it would get done, how to formulate a paradoxical suggestion, and so on. In the 1950s, one could legitimately give directives if one hypnotized the client. As times changed, it became possible to consider giving a directive without the hypnosis framework. One merely gave the directive. I recall experimenting with inducing
particular dreams with hypnosis. I began to experiment with inducing such a dream without hypnotizing the client. I just told the client to have the dream with an identifying characteristic, and in a surprising number of cases it would happen. I began to give up formal hypnosis in many cases and used directive therapy. I think this happened to others as directives became legitimate. Of course, Erickson had been doing directive therapy prior to the 1950s.

There is another value to hypnotic training even if the trainee is not going to use formal hypnosis. Hypnosis seems to have the power to imbue a person with more imagination than those who have not had the training. As I have put it, if a woman who suffered from headaches without a physical cause came to a therapist trained in hypnosis, the therapist would immediately think about how it could be altered. For example, the therapist could suggest to her that the headaches can stop, or that she have the headache but won’t feel it, or that a headache can occur intensely for a few seconds rather than for hours, or that she have amnesia about the headaches and therefore not anticipate having another one. The therapist could also suggest to the client that she could view the headache on a screen, or understand its meaning but not feel it, or have a dream of a headache that slowly vanishes upon awakening, or use her head another way such as listening to music.

One can also think about the varieties of change possible with hypnosis. One can even ask a client questions such as “Do you want to change? Would you like to change slowly or quickly? Would you like to be aware that you are changing or just find that it happened? Would you be willing to do anything to change? Training in hypnosis can open up one’s thinking about a variety of opportunities.

**Hypnotic Problems**

One of the problems that occurs with hypnosis is that it seems to be involved in all the marginal activities in the field. Milton Erickson, who was strict about hypnosis being an ethical medical practice, would be tossing in his grave over some of the practices that now are popular. There are several controversial arenas. There is the regression to past lives. The idea that one can regress someone to childhood has been expanded to include the idea that one can regress a client to one or more previous lives. Of course, hypnosis is the procedure to bring about this miracle.

There are also multiple personalities, which are, of course, brought out with hypnosis. One might sustain a belief of one or more personalities housed in the same body, but when the total is 200 or 300, then
hypnosis has been used somewhat excessively. One can include satanic cults and their activities in the domain of hypnosis. Perhaps there is no other way to enjoy them. There are memories of childhood abuse that sometimes might be true and sometimes might be a product of a false memory, which causes serious family distress. Another marginal group are those who have been treated shamefully by aliens, according to their colleagues using hypnosis.

As hypnosis becomes more active, hypnotist and subject collaborate in some rather far out ideas, with the hypnotist determining that the experiences are true and seeking to document marginal experiences.

A major problem that has arisen, thanks to hypnosis, is the question of what is remembered about the past. What is true? The entire theory of repression is a structure of the past, and, if the memories of the past are not true, then we have a situation of doubting all psychodynamic theory. What do we do with the explanation that a repressed idea is causing a present compulsion when that memory proves to be false? What do we do with the theories of trauma? Are the social workers who take patient histories writing fiction?

Erickson has complicated the false memory issue by inducing false memories deliberately, as in *The February Man*. He introduces a different history for a woman and even provides a kindly fictional figure, who becomes a pleasant memory. He provides different and positive memories to make a past more pleasant and so a present life more cheerful. The question is not only whether one can change the past but whether it is ethical to introduce a memory as a real event. We use hypnosis to change the present. Should we use it to change the past?

**Hypnotisches Seminar**

Jay Haley


*Stephanie Reigel, MD*
Un séminaire hypnotique

Jay Haley


Johanne Raynault
C. Tr. (STIBC)

Seminario hipnótico

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Resumen: En esta transcripción de una conferencia ofrecida en el 2000, Jay Haley comienza respondiendo la pregunta “¿qué es la hipnosis?” Haley recuenta las circunstancias cuando Gregory Bateson lo alienta a conocer a Milton Erickson para discutir la historia de la hipnosis y la naturaleza paradójica de la inducción al trance. Haley expresa muchos pensamientos originales sobre la personalidades múltiples, la regresión a vidas anteriores, y cómo manejar memorias que históricamente pudiesen ser falsas. Sofisticado y sutil, este es Haley en sus mejores momentos.

Omar Sánchez-Armáss Cappello, PhD
Autonomous University of San Luis Potosi, Mexico