AN INTERACTIONAL EXPLANATION OF HYPNOSIS

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Abstract: In this paper, the author offers what he sees as a new approach to understanding or defining hypnosis. Drawing from his work with Gregory Bateson, John Weakland, Don Jackson, and Bill Fry, Haley emphasizes the relational communicative aspect of trance. Noting the inherent difficulty of studying subjective experience, Haley highlights again the importance of communication and the therapist-patient relationship.

The only reasonable excuse for adding another theory of hypnosis to the many that have been proposed is an entirely new approach to the problem. Previous theoreticians have conjectured about the perceptual or physiological nature of hypnotic trance, and the result is a literature on hypnosis consisting of conflicting ideas and insoluble paradoxes. The various theoreticians have proposed at least the following descriptions of hypnotic trance. The trance is sleep, but it isn’t sleep. It is a conditioned reflex, but it occurs without conditioning. It is a transference relationship involving libidinal and submissive instinctual strivings, but this is because of aggressive and sadistic instinctual strivings. It is a state in which the person is hypersuggestible to another’s suggestions but one where only auto-suggestion is effective since compliance from the subject is required. It is a state of concentrated attention, but it is achieved by dissociation. It is a process of role-playing, but the role is subjectively real. It is a neurological change based upon psychological suggestions, but the neurological changes have yet to be measured and

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the psychological suggestions have yet to be defined. Finally, there is a trance state that exists separately from trance phenomena, such as catalepsy, hallucinations, and so on, but these phenomena are essential to a true trance state.

One can wonder if a rigorous answer is possible to the question: Is there a state called “trance” that is different from the normal state of being “awake”? The “trance” state is by definition a subjective experience. It can be investigated only if the investigator examines his subjective experiences when supposedly in such a state. This is a most unreliable method of research, particularly when one is dealing with the slippery perceptive experiences of hypnotic trance. Whether or not another person is in a trance state cannot really be known any more than what another person is thinking can be known—or even if he is thinking. We can observe the communicative behavior of a person, but we can only conjecture about his subjective experiences. A rigorous investigation of hypnosis must center on the communicative behavior of hypnotist and trance subject with, at most, careful conjecture about the internal processes that provoke that behavior. The theory, or descriptive explanation, of hypnosis offered here will not add to the current confusion about the trance state but will deal only with the interaction between hypnotist and trance subject.

Although most attempts to be “objective” about psychological processes tend to ignore the most significant problems involved, there is decided merit in analyzing the manifestations of a subjective state instead of making inferences about the state itself. Debate about hypnosis has always centered around the question of whether a subject is really experiencing a phenomenon or only behaving as if he is. Such a debate is essentially unresolvable. The few crude instruments available, such as Galvanic Skin Response and EEG, indicate slight physiological changes, but no instrument can tell us whether a subject is really hallucinating or really experiencing an anesthesia. At most we can only poke him with a sharp instrument in the supposedly anesthetized area or amputate a limb, as Esdaile did, and observe his communicative behavior. Our only data are the communications of the subject; the rest is inevitably conjecture. It would seem practical to begin an investigation of hypnosis with an analysis of what can be seen and recorded on film in the hypnotic situation and thereby limit what needs to be inferred from the subject’s behavior.

If an investigation centers on the process of communication between a hypnotist and subject, then answerable questions about hypnosis can be posed: Is the communicative behavior of a supposedly hypnotized subject significantly different from the communicative behavior of that person when not hypnotized? What sequences of communication between hypnotist and trance subject produce the communicative behavior characteristic of a person in trance? Answers to these
questions will explain what is unique to the hypnotic relationship and differentiates it from all others. To answer such questions, a system for describing communicative behavior is needed. An approach to such a system will be offered here with the argument that human interaction can be dissected and labeled and that a particular kind of communication sequence is characteristic of the hypnotic relationship.

**Accepted Generalizations About Hypnosis**

In the literature on hypnosis, there is a sufficient repetition of ideas so that a few generalizations can be made about the hypnotic situation that would be agreed upon by most hypnotists. It is now generally accepted that hypnotic trance has something to do with a relationship between the hypnotist and subject. In the past, it was assumed that trance was the result of the influence of the planets or merely something happening inside the subject independently of the hypnotist. Currently, it is assumed that hypnotic phenomena result from an interpersonal relationship as hypnotist and trance subject communicate with one another by verbal and nonverbal behavior. It is also generally agreed that “trance” involves a focusing of attention. The subject does not while in trance report about activities outside the task defined by the hypnotist, and his reports about the hypnotic task are in agreement with the hypnotist’s reports. In addition, it is assumed that the relationship between hypnotist and subject is such that the hypnotist initiates what happens in the situation. He initiates a sequence of messages, and the subject responds. The common assumption that the hypnotist must have “prestige” with the subject seems to be an agreement that the subject must accept the hypnotist as the person who will initiate ideas and suggestions. Although the subject may respond to the hypnotist’s messages in his own unique way; still, by definition he is responding and thereby acknowledging the hypnotist to be the one who has the initiative in the situation. In those instances where the subject decides the task, it is implicitly agreed that the hypnotist is letting this happen. It is also accepted that in every induction the hypnotist at some point “challenges” the subject either explicitly or implicitly to try to do something he has been told he cannot do.

These few generalizations are about all the statements that would be acceptable to a hypnotic investigator. When more specific statements are made, debate and dissension arises. However, there is one further generalization that makes explicit what is implicit in most techniques and theories of trance induction, and some consideration should make it acceptable to most hypnotists. Hypnotic interaction progresses from “voluntary” responses by the subject to “involuntary”
responses. “Voluntary” responses are those that hypnotist and subject agree can be deliberately accomplished, such as placing the hands in the lap or looking at a light. “Involuntary” responses are those that hypnotist and subject agree are not volitional, such as a feeling of tiredness, levitating a hand without deliberately lifting it, or manifesting an hallucination. Involuntary responses in general consist of changes at the autonomic level, perceptual changes, and certain motor behavior. The motor aspects of trance are particularly obvious during a challenge when a subject tries to bend an arm and cannot because of the opposition of muscles.

Every trance induction method known to this writer progresses either rapidly or slowly from requests for voluntary responses to requests for involuntary ones. This alternating sequence continues even into the deepest stages of trance. When the sequence occurs rapidly, as in a theatrical induction, the hypnotist quickly asks the subject to sit down, put his hands on his knees, lean his head forward, and so on. Following these requests for voluntary behavior, he states that the subject cannot open his eyes, or move a hand, or bend an arm, or he requests similar involuntary behavior. In a relaxation induction the sequence occurs more slowly as the hypnotist endlessly repeats phrases about deliberately relaxing the various muscles of the body and follows these suggestions with others suggesting a feeling of tiredness in his body or some other involuntary response. The most typical hypnotic induction, the eye fixation, involves a request that the subject voluntarily assume a certain position and look at a spot or at a light. This is followed by a request for an involuntarily heaviness of the eyelids. A “conversational” trance induction proceeds from requests that the subject think about something, or notice a feeling, or look here and there, to suggestions that require a shift in the subject’s perceptions or sensations. The trance state is usually defined as that moment of shift when the subject begins to follow suggestions involuntarily. Either the subject struggles to move a hand and cannot because of an involuntary opposition of muscles, or he reports a perception or feeling that he presumably could not voluntarily produce. Before dealing with hypnosis in more interactional terms, the hypnotic situation can be summarized according to these general statements of agreement. In the hypnotic situation, the hypnotist initiates ideas or suggestions that are responded to by the trance subject. The hypnotist persuades the subject to follow voluntarily his suggestions and concentrate upon what he assigns. When this is done, the hypnotist requests involuntary responses from the subject. The progress of the hypnotic interaction progressively defines the relationship as one in which the hypnotist is in control of, or initiating, what happens and the subject is responding more and initiating less.
Defining a Type of Relationship

As hypnotist and subject, or any two people, interact, they work out what sort of relationship they have with each other. If the relationship stabilizes, the two people work out a mutual agreement about what sort of behavior is to take place between them and therefore what sort of relationship it is. This agreement is achieved “implicitly” by what they say and how they say it as they respond to each other rather than by explicit discussion of what sort of relationship it is. To describe the working out of a particular relationship it is necessary to differentiate it from others and label it.

If one took all the possible kinds of communicative behavior that might be exchanged between two people, it could be roughly classified into behavior that defines a relationship as symmetrical and behavior that defines the relationship as complementary. A symmetrical relationship is one between two people who exchange the same sort of behavior. Each person initiates action, criticizes the other, offers advice, and so on. This type of relationship tends to be competitive; if one person mentions that he has succeeded in some endeavor, the other person mentions that he has succeeded in some equally important endeavor. The people in such a relationship constantly emphasize their equality to, or symmetry with, the other person.

A complementary relationship consists of one person giving and the other receiving rather than the two competing as in a symmetrical relationship. In a complementary relationship the two people are of unequal status, one is in a superior position and the other is in a secondary position. A “superior” position means that the person initiates action and the other follows that action; he offers criticism and the other accepts it, he offers advice and the other assumes he should, and so on. In such a relationship the two people tend to fit together or complement each other.

This simple division of relationships into two types applies to all two-person systems. No relationship between any two people will consistently be of one type in all circumstances; usually there are areas of the relationship worked out as one type or another. Also a relationship may shift from basically one type to basically another. Such a shift may occur rapidly back and forth or it may consistently tend in one direction. When a child grows up he progressively shifts from a complementary towards a symmetrical relationship with his parents as he becomes an adult.

Each person in a relationship defines the relationship by what he says to the other and the way he qualifies what he says. Although every message interchanged between two people will, in a sense, define the relationship—if only by expressing the idea “this is the kind of relationship where this sort of thing is said,”—still there are certain
kinds of messages that make more of an issue of the sort of relationship than other kinds. A professor may lecture and one of his students may ask questions to clarify various points, but then the student may ask a question in such a way that he is implying, “I know as much about this as you do.” The professor must then re-define the relationship as complementary—one between teacher and student. The professor does this either by showing that the student doesn’t know as much as he does or by indicating that he doesn’t appreciate the tone of that question. At certain moments, in response to certain kinds of messages, the type of relationship is put in question. The kind of message that puts the relationship in question will be termed here a “maneuver”. In the example cited, the student made a symmetrical maneuver—a maneuver defining the relationship as one between two equals. The professor’s reply when he puts the student in his place would be a complementary maneuver—a maneuver designed to define the relationship as complementary. Such maneuvers are constantly being interchanged in any human relationship and tend to be most often used in an unstable relationship where the two people are groping towards a common definition of their relationship.

Maneuvers, or “relationship messages,” tend to put the type of relationship in question and by their nature demand a maneuver in response. If two people, A and B, talk about the weather they may be defining the relationship as neutral and no particular issue is made of what sort of relationship it is. But when one or the other makes a maneuver, the nature of the relationship is immediately an issue. Maneuvers consist of (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956) (1) requests, commands, or suggestions, that another person do, say, think, or feel something, and (2) comments on the other person’s communicative behavior. Should A ask B to do something, then B is immediately posed the problem of whether this is the sort of relationship where A has the right to make that request. B is also affected by whether the request was made tentatively or apologetically, or whether it was a rude command. Since the relationship is in question, B must either do what A says and accepts A’s definition of the relationship, or refuse to do it and thereby counter with a maneuver to define the relationship differently. He may, as a third possibility, do what A says but qualify his doing it with a statement that he is “permitting” A to get by with this and therefore he is doing it but not agreeing with A’s definition of the relationship.

As an example, if one employee asks another employee of equal status to empty the wastebasket, this could be interpreted by the other as a maneuver to define the relationship as complementary or one between unequals. If the other raises his eyebrow, this is describable as a counter-maneuver to define the relationship as symmetrical. The first employee may respond to that raised eyebrow by saying, “Well, I don’t mind doing it myself if you don’t want to.” In this way he indicates that his
original request was not a complementary maneuver but really a symmetrical one, since it was something one equal would ask of another equal. The issue was raised because the first employee used that class of message termed here a maneuver—he requested that the other person do something. Similarly if a person comments on another person's behavior, the issue is immediately raised whether this is the sort of relationship where such a comment is appropriate. If one person suggests that another dresses rather sloppily, the counter maneuver may be, "Who the devil are you to tell me how to dress?" Such a comment indicates the relationship is symmetrical rather than complementary.

A complication must be added to this simple schema of relationships. There are times when one person lets another person successfully use a particular kind of maneuver. For example, A may act helpless and force B to take care of him. Ostensibly A is in a secondary position in a complementary relationship since he is being taken care of. Yet he arranged the situation, and therefore he is actually on the superior end of a complementary relationship. In the same way one person may encourage another to do something that implies that they are two equals. If A lets B use symmetrical maneuvers, then A is initiating the behavior and is in a complementary relationship with B. Whenever one person lets, or forces, the other to define the relationship in a certain way, he is at a higher level defining the relationship as complementary.

Therefore a third type of relationship must be added to the other two and will be termed a meta-complementary relationship. The person who establishes a meta-complementary relationship with another is controlling the maneuvers of the other. He is permitting, or forcing, another person to make maneuvers that define the relationship in a certain way. He may let someone else appear in charge of the behavior in the relationship, but since he is labeling what happens as happening with his permission then he is in the superior position of a meta-complementary relationship.

In summary, relationships can be simply divided into complementary and symmetrical with the type of relationship an ongoing subject of definition between any two people. The type of relationship becomes a particular issue when one of the two peoples makes a maneuver, defined as a request, command, or suggestion that the other person do, say, think, feel, or notice something, or a comment on the other person's behavior. A maneuver provokes a series of maneuvers by both participants until a mutually agreed-upon definition of the relationship is worked out between them. These maneuvers involve not only what is said, but the meta-communication of the two people or the way they qualify what they say to each other. A third type of relationship is proposed, a meta-complementary relationship, to describe that interaction where one person permits or forces the other to use maneuvers that
define the relationship in a certain way. The person who acts helpless in order to force someone to take charge of him is actually in charge at a meta-complementary level.

**The Hypnotic Relationship**

With these types of relationship as background, hypnotic interaction can be described as apparently taking place in a complementary relationship. The hypnotist suggests, and the subject follows his suggestions so that each person’s communicative behavior is complementary. The act of making a suggestion is a maneuver to define the relationship as complementary, and the act of following the suggestion is an acceptance of that definition of the relationship.

In hypnotic literature a suggestion is defined as “the presentation of an idea” as if a suggestion is an isolated unit unrelated to the relationship between the two people. Actually the act of making a suggestion and the act of responding to one is a process that has been going on between the two people and will continue. It is a class of messages rather than a single message and is more usefully defined in that way. A “suggestion” is defined here as a maneuver: that class of messages that make an issue of what type of relationship exists between the person who offers and the person who responds to the suggestion. A suggestible person is one who is willing to accept the interpersonal implications of doing what he is told. This idea is stated implicitly in such comments as “He willingly follows suggestions.” It is possible to follow suggestions unwillingly, as well as not to follow them at all, but when a person willingly follows suggestions he is accepting a complementary relationship with the person who is telling him what to do. There are several crucial points about the hypnotic interaction that differentiates it from other relationships.

1. It has been said that certain kinds of messages exchanged between two people make an issue of what kind of relationship they have. The hypnotic relationship consists entirely of the interchange of this class of messages. The hypnotist tells the subject what to do with his suggestions and comments on the subject’s behavior. There are no other kinds of messages involved; talk about the weather is not interchanged.

2. When the hypnotist tells the subject what to do, he is defining the relationship as complementary. The subject must either accept this definition by responding and doing what he is told or respond in such a way that he defines the relationship as symmetrical. Some subjects are resistant, and every subject is resistant to some degree, and the central problem in hypnotic induction is overcoming the resistance of the subject. In communications terms “resistance” consists of counter-maneuvers by the
subject to define the relationship as symmetrical. No person will immediately and completely accept the secondary position in a complementary relationship. The hypnotist must encourage or enforce a complementary relationship by countering the subject’s counter-maneuvers. Whereas in ordinary relationships between people both persons may initiate or respond with either symmetrical or complementary maneuvers, in the hypnotic situation the hypnotist concentrates entirely on initiating complementary maneuvers and insisting that the subject respond in agreement with that definition of the relationship. When the subject is “awake,” or when the two people are maneuvering differently, the hypnotist may behave symmetrically with a subject, but during the hypnotic relationship his efforts are devoted entirely to defining the relationship as complementary. A complication will be added to this description later, but for the moment let us describe the hypnotist-subject relationship as complementary.

When he meets with particular kinds of resistance, a hypnotist may explicitly put himself in a secondary position with a subject while implicitly taking control at the meta-complementary level. That is, if the subject insists on defining the relationship as symmetrical, the hypnotist may appear to hand control of the relationship over to the subject by saying that he is only guiding the subject into trance and must follow the subject’s lead with whatever he wishes to do. Having placed himself in the secondary position of a complementary relationship, the hypnotist then proceeds to give the subject suggestions and expect him to follow them, thus defining the relationship as complementary with himself in the superior position. Whenever the hypnotist behaves in a symmetrical or secondary way, it is to take control at the meta-complementary level.

3. When a subject accepts a complementary relationship, whether he likes it or not, it becomes possible for him to misinterpret messages from the environment, from another person, or from inside himself. This statement is conjecture, since it describes the internal processes of an individual, yet such an inference seems supportable on the basis of the subject’s communicative behavior. When the hypnotist suggests an hallucination, the subject will misinterpret the messages from the environment that contradict the hallucinatory image. The same is true of bodily sensations, emotions, and memories. The more the subject is unable to counter the meta-complementary maneuvers of the hypnotist, the more trance manifestations he is capable of experiencing. To describe his behavior from an interactional point of view, it is necessary to discuss what the evidence is for “involuntary” behavior.

**The Involuntary in Terms of Behavior**

An attempt to bring rigor into the investigation of hypnosis requires us to deal with observable behavior rather than to conjecture about the internal processes of a subject. When it is said above that the trance subject experiences involuntary phenomena, this statement is unverifiable.
We cannot know whether or not a subject is experiencing an hallucination or various bodily sensations and emotions. For example, when a subject’s arm begins to levitate we might say that this is an involuntary phenomenon and therefore a manifestation of trance. As a hypnotic subject, we might ourselves experience that hand levitation and feel that the hand was lifting up and we were not lifting it, thus we would subjectively know that this was involuntary. However, as investigators of hypnosis we cannot rely on our subjective experiences. Ideally we should be able to describe the processes of trance induction and trance phenomena while observing a film of hypnotist and subject interacting. Confined to our observations of the film, we could not observe “involuntary” activities by the subject. We could only observe behavior that we inferred was involuntary. Our problem is to describe the communicative behavior of a subject at that moment when we draw the inference that he is experiencing an involuntary trance phenomenon.

To describe communicative behavior one must take into account the fact that people not only communicate a message but qualify or label that message to indicate how the message is to be received. A message may be qualified by another that affirms it, or it may be qualified by one that denies it. Thus a person can step on another person’s foot and qualify it with a statement that this was accidental or involuntary. Or the person may step on the other person’s foot and qualify this message with a “vicious” expression that indicates “I’m doing this on purpose.” Thus a qualifying message may either deny or be incongruent with another message, or it may affirm or be congruent with the other message. When we observe a film of two people interacting and we conclude that something one of them does is “involuntary”, we draw that conclusion from the way the person qualifies what he does. If we see a trance subject levitating an arm and hear him say in a surprised way, “Why, my arm is lifting up,” we conclude that he is experiencing an involuntary phenomenon. Our conclusion is drawn from the fact that the subject is doing something and denying that he is doing it. He may make this denial with a verbal comment, with a surprised expression, by the way he lifts the arm, by commenting on it later after he was awake, and so on. He may also say, “Why, my arm is lifting up,” and thereby deny that he is lifting it, but say this in an “insincere” tone of voice. That is, he qualifies the arm lifting with two statements: one says “I’m not doing it,” the other says, “I’m doing it.” When we observe this incongruence between his tone of voice and his statement we conclude that the subject is simulating an arm levitation and that it isn’t really involuntary. Our conclusion is based on the fact that two incongruences are apparent in the ways he qualifies his messages: (1) He lifts his hand and says he didn’t, (2) he says he didn’t in a tone of voice which indicates he did. If he should express astonishment that his hand lifted in words, in his tone of voice, and in his postural communication
so that all of his messages are congruent with a denial that he is lifting his arm, then we say it is really an involuntary movement.

Besides the fact that we detect simulation of hypnotic behavior by noting two incongruences in the ways the subject qualifies some activity, it seems clear that the goal of hypnotic induction from the behavioral point of view is to persuade the subject to deny fully and completely that he is carrying out the activity. That is, the hypnotist pushes the subject towards qualifying his behavior with messages congruent with each other and that as a totality deny that the subject is doing what he is doing. When the subject behaves in this way, an observer reports that the subject is experiencing an involuntary phenomenon.

As an illustration, let us suppose that a hypnotist wishes to induce a hallucination in a subject. After a series of interactional procedures from hand levitation through challenges, the hypnotist suggests that the subject look up at a bare wall and see that painting of an elephant there. He may do this abruptly, or he may suggest that the subject watch the painting develop there and later press for an acknowledgement that the painting is there. The subject can respond in one of several ways. He can look at the wall and say, “There is no painting there.” He can say, “Yes, I see the painting,” but qualify this statement in such a way, perhaps by his tone of voice, so that he negates his statement. In this way he indicates he is saying this to please the hypnotist. Or the subject can say there is a painting on the wall and qualify this statement congruently with his tone of voice, posture, and a contextual statement such as, “Naturally there’s a painting there, so what,” or “Our hostess has always liked elephants.” This latter kind of behavior would be considered evidence of trance.

Characteristic of a person in trance is (a) a statement that is (b) incongruent with, or denies, some other statement, but that is (c) qualified by all other statements congruently. The subject in trance (a) reports a picture (b) on a bare wall, thus making a statement incongruent with the context, and (c) he affirms his statement that there is a picture on the wall with other verbal messages, his tone of voice, and body movement. As another example, the subject lifts his hand during a hand levitation and indicates that he isn’t lifting it. This statement, that is incongruent with the lifting hand, is supported or affirmed by the ways he says it. If a subject is experiencing an anesthesia, he responds passively to a poke with a pin, thereby responding incongruently, and he affirms his response with congruent words and tone of voice.

The behavior of a subject in trance is differentiable from the behavior of the subject awake by this single incongruence. A person in normal discourse may manifest incongruences when he communicates his multiple messages, or all of his messages may be congruent or affirm each other. The single incongruence is characterized of trance
behavior. Even though several hypnotic tasks may be assigned a subject simultaneously, each is characterized by a single incongruence.

The single incongruence of trance has another characteristic that differentiates it from incongruences in normal communication. This incongruence consists of a denial that he is responding to the hypnotist. The subject is doing what the hypnotist suggests while denying that he is doing what the hypnotist suggests. If a subject levitates a hand, he qualifies this with a denial that he is lifting it. When he does this he is indicating that he is merely reporting an occurrence, he does not qualify the lifting hand with an indication that it is a response to the hypnotist even though at that moment the hypnotist is suggesting that the hand lift. Should the subject act like a person awake and lift the hand while indicating that he is lifting it, he would be acknowledging the hand lifting as a message to the hypnotist. By qualifying the hand lifting with a denial that he is doing it, he manifests an incongruence that indicates that he is merely making a report. In the same way the subject merely reports the existence of a painting on the wall instead of indicating that his seeing the painting there is a statement to the hypnotist.

To formalize the behavior of the trance subject, it can be said that any communicative behavior offered by one person to another can be described in terms of four elements: a sender, a message, a receiver, and a context in which the communication takes place. In other words, any message can be translated into this statement:

“I am communicating something
(a) (b)
to you in this situation.”
(c) (d)

Since communicative behavior is always qualified, any element in this message will be qualified by an affirmation or a denial. In a hypnotic trance, the subject denies these elements and does not affirm them. Trance behavior denying each element can be briefly listed.

(a) Whenever he requests an “involuntary” response, the hypnotist is urging the subject to deny that he is responding or communicating something. The first element of the statement above, “I am communicating,” is qualified with a denial and therefore changed to “It is just happening.”
(b) The hypnotist not only urges the subject to deny that he is originating a message, such as an arm levitation, he may also urge the subject to deny that anything is happening, i.e., being communicated. The subject may appear to be unaware that his hand is lifting, thus qualifying the lifting hand with a statement that it isn’t lifting. Or he may manifest a similar denial by manifesting amnesia. If he qualifies his behavior with a denial that it happened, then nothing was communicated. He can not only say “I didn’t lift my hand,” but he can say, “My hand didn’t lift,” and thereby manifest an incongruence between his statement and his lifting hand.
When a subject’s tone of voice and body movement is congruent with the statement that he doesn’t recall something, or congruent with the absence of a report of some activity during trance, then observers report that he is experiencing amnesia.

(c, d) It is also possible for the subject to deny the final elements in the essential message above. He may indicate that what he is doing is not a communication to the hypnotist in this situation but qualifying, or labeling, the hypnotist as someone else and/or the situation as some other. Hypnotic regression is manifested behaviorally by the subject qualifying his statements as not to the hypnotist but another person (alter all if he is regressed he hasn’t met the hypnotist yet), perhaps a teacher, and the context as not the present one but perhaps a past schoolroom. When all of his communicative behavior is congruent with one of these incongruent qualifications, then an observer will report that the subject is experiencing regression.

In summary, a subject in trance as well as a person awake exhibits behavior toward another person that is describable as the statement “I am communicating something to you in this situation.” The trance subject qualifies one or all the elements of this statement incongruently so that the statement is changed to “It is just happening,” or “Nothing happened,” or “I am communicating to someone else in some other place and time.”

The problem posed by hypnotic induction is this: How does one person influence another to manifest a single incongruence in his communicative behavior so that he denies that he is communicating something, that something is being communicated, or that it is being communicated to the hypnotist in this situation? More simply, how is a person influenced to do what he is told and simultaneously deny that he is doing anything?

**Trance Induction in Terms of Behavior**

When hypnotic trance is seen as an interaction consisting of one person persuading another to do something and deny he is doing it, then it would seem to follow that trance induction must consist of requests for just that behavior from a subject. The hypnotist must ask the subject to do something and at the same time tell him not to do it. The nature of human communication makes it possible for the subject to satisfy these conflicting demands. He can do what the hypnotist asks, and at the same time qualify this activity with statements denying that he is doing it or that it is being done. Thus he does it, but he doesn’t do it.

To simplify the rich and complex interchange that takes place between a hypnotist and subject, let us describe a hand levitation induction. The hypnotist sits down with the subject and tells him to put his
hand on the arm of the chair. He then says something like, “I don’t want you to move that hand, I just want you to notice the feelings in it.” After a while the hypnotist says, “In a moment the hand is going to begin to lift. Lifting, lifting, lifting.” If we could divest ourselves of theories and naively observe this interaction between hypnotist and subject, it would be obvious to us that the hypnotist is saying to the subject, “Don’t lift your hand,” and then he is saying, “Lift your hand.” Since our observation is biased by theories of human behavior, we see this behavior in terms of the unconscious and conscious or in terms of autonomic processes, and so the obvious incongruence between the requests of the hypnotist is not so obvious. Yet we are faced with the inevitable fact that if the subject’s hand lifts, he lifted it. He may deny it, but no one else lifted that hand.

There are only two possible responses by a subject to a request that he lift his hand and not lift it. He can refuse to do anything and thereby antagonize the hypnotist and end the trance session. He can lift his hand and simultaneously deny that he is lifting it, or conceivably that it is lifting. A third possibility would be for him to lift it and say he did, and then the hypnotist would say, “But I told you not to lift it,” and the procedure would begin again.

Every trance induction method involves this kind of contradictory request. Indeed whenever one requests “involuntary” behavior from another person he is inevitably requesting that the subject do something and simultaneously requesting that he not do it. This is what “involuntary” means.

Not only is the double-level request apparent in trance induction, but during the process of deepening the trance it becomes even more obvious. At some time or other in hypnotic interaction the hypnotist tests or challenges the subject. These challenges are all formally the same: The hypnotist asks the subject to do something and simultaneously asks him not to do it. The most common is the eye closure challenge. The hypnotist asks the subject to squeeze his eyes tightly closed during a count of three, and at the count of three the subject is asked to try to open his eyes. He is told that the harder he tries to open them the more tightly they will remain closed. Once again the request “Open your eyes” is qualified by the statement “Keep your eyes closed.” Essentially the subject is told, “Obey this suggestion,” and then he is told, “Don’t obey my suggestions.” When the test is successful and the subject keeps his eyes closed, he is said to be “involuntarily” unable to open them. Observing his behavior we would say he is keeping his eyes closed and qualifying this behavior with the statement that he is not keeping them closed.

2The use of the term “denial” here does not imply that the subject is calculatedly denying that he is lifting his hand. He may subjectively be certain that the hand is lifting itself. The emphasis here is on his behavior.
The Double Bind

This double level request that the hypnotist poses can be labeled a "double bind" and its characteristics can be described. A "double bind" is present when one person communicates a message and qualifies that message with an incongruent message in a situation where the other person must respond to these contradictory messages, cannot leave the field, and cannot comment on the contradiction (1). The hypnotic situation not only contains double-level requests by the hypnotist, but also the other two elements; the subject cannot comment on the contradiction or leave the field. It is difficult for the subject to leave the field because he has usually requested a trance to begin with. Most hypnosis is done with voluntary subjects. It is also difficult for the subject to comment on the incongruence in the hypnotist’s suggestions because of the hypnotist’s approach. If a subject is asked to concentrate on his hand and comments on this suggestion by asking why he should, he is usually informed that he does not need to inquire why but should merely follow suggestions. The behavior of the hypnotist rather effectively prevents the subject from engaging in conversation about the hypnotist’s behavior.

As an illustration of an obvious double bind during a hypnotic induction, a resistant subject once said to Milton Erickson, “You may be able to hypnotize other people, but you can’t hypnotize me!” Erickson invited the subject to the lecture platform, asked him to sit down, and then said to him, “I want you to stay awake, wider and wider awake, wider and wider awake.” The subject promptly went into a deep trance. The subject was faced with a double level message: “Come up here and go into a trance,” and “Stay awake.” He knew that if he followed Erickson’s suggestions, he would go into a trance. Therefore he was determined not to follow his suggestions. Yet if he refused to follow the suggestion to stay awake, he would go into a trance. Thus he was caught in a double bind. Note that these were not merely two contradictory messages, they were two contradictory levels of message. The statement “Stay awake” was qualified by, or framed by, the message “Come up here and go into a trance.” Since one message was qualified by another, they were of different levels of message. Such conflicting levels of message may occur when verbal statement, tone of voice, body movement, or the contextual situation, qualify each other incongruently. A double level message may occur in a single statement. For example, if one person says to another, “Disobey me,” the other person is faced with an incongruent set of messages and can neither obey nor disobey. If he obeys, he is disobeying, and if he disobeys, he is obeying. The statement “Disobey me” contains a qualification of itself and can be translated into “Don’t obey my commands,” and the simultaneous qualifying statement, “Don’t obey my command to not obey my commands.” A hypnotic challenge consists of this type of request.
When the hypnotist presents incongruent messages to the subject, the subject can only respond satisfactorily with incongruent messages. The peculiar kinds of behavior exhibited by a hypnotic subject are reciprocals to the hypnotist’s requests. As an illustration, we can diagram hypnotic interaction in this way.

The letter A represents the hypnotist’s statement, “Keep your eyes open and stare at this point.” This statement is qualified by B, “Your eyelids will close.” The subject cannot respond satisfactorily if he responds to A and keeps his eyes open. Nor can he respond satisfactorily by responding to B and closing them. He can only respond with incongruent messages when asked to close his eyes and not close them. He must close them, C, and qualify this closing with a denial that he did it, D.

Should the subject respond to only A or B, and thereby respond congruently, the hypnotist is likely to point out to him that he isn’t cooperating and begin again. More clever hypnotists will handle a congruent response in other ways. For example, if a subject should stubbornly keep his eyes open, thus responding only to A, the hypnotist might suggest that he hold them open as long as he can, no matter how much of an effort this is. In this way he ultimately produces the eye closure and accepts the weariness as an “involuntary” response.

Essentially the hypnotist is saying to the subject, “Do as I say, but don’t do as I say,” and the subject is responding with, “I’m doing what you say, but I’m not doing what you say.” Since human beings can communicate at two levels, this type of interaction becomes possible.

**The Hypnotic Relationship**

The relationship between hypnotist and subject was previously described as the enforcement of a complementary relationship by the hypnotist. When the subject responds to the hypnotist’s messages rather
than initiating his own, he is joining the hypnotist in a mutual definition of the relationship as complementary. When the subject “resists”, he is opposing the hypnotist’s complementary maneuvers with counter-maneuvers. Characteristically these define the relationship with the hypnotist as symmetrical—one between equals—rather than complementary. The hypnotist counters these maneuvers with maneuvers of his own that define the relationship as complementary. He may, for example, ask the subject to resist him. In this way a symmetrical maneuver is re-defined as complementary. It becomes behavior requested, and therefore to respond symmetrically is to do as the hypnotist says and so behave as one does in a complementary relationship. This “topping,” or counterering the maneuvers of the subject, was described as essentially an attempt by the hypnotist to win control of what sort of relationship he and the subject are in.

The particular maneuver of the hypnotist, the double bind, makes it impossible for the subject to counter with a maneuver that defines the relationship as symmetrical. If one is asked to do something and simultaneously asked not to do it, one cannot refuse to follow suggestions. If the subject responds or if he does not respond he is doing what the hypnotist requests and when one does what another requests, he is in a complementary relationship. The subject can only behave symmetrically by commenting on the contradiction or leaving the field and ending the relationship. If he leaves the field, the relationship is ended. If he comments on the hypnotist’s statements and thereby behaves in a symmetrical way, he is likely to meet a counter-maneuver that enforces a complementary relationship. The hypnotist may, for example, suggest that he comment on his behavior, thereby stepping to the meta-complementary level and defining the comments as responses to his suggestions. Then, if the subject comments, he is doing what he is told and therefore defining the relationship as complementary.

A complication must be added to this description of hypnosis. To say that the hypnotist imposes a complementary relationship and the subject in trance is agreeing to this definition is to leave hypnosis undifferentiated from other types of relationship. Conceivably there are many other situations in that one person tells another what to do and the other willingly does what he is told so that they mutually define the relationship as complementary. Yet in these other situations trance behavior is not apparent. The person doing what he is told does not manifest denials that he is doing so. It seems apparent that trance behavior is not explained by saying that the subject and hypnotist behave in those ways that define their relationship as complementary. The complication is this: The hypnotist not only prevents the subject from behaving in symmetrical ways, thus forcing him to behave in complementary ways, but he prevents the subject from behaving in complementary ways as well.
If the subject resists the hypnotist, thus behaving in a symmetrical way, the hypnotist may ask him to resist, thus forcing him to behave in a complementary way. However, if the subject behaves in a complementary way and follows suggestions willingly, the hypnotist then asks him to behave symmetrically. He asks the subject to refuse to follow his suggestions. Essentially a challenge is a request that the subject resist the hypnotist, since the subject is asked to do something the hypnotist has told him not to do. Actually the double bind prevents both complementary and symmetrical behavior. Just as one cannot refuse to respond to a double bind and is thereby prevented from behaving symmetrically, one cannot behave in a complementary way by responding because he is also being told not to respond. The subject is also prevented from achieving the third type of relationship, the meta-complementary. Conceivably he could let the hypnotist tell him what to do and in this sense be labeling what the hypnotist does as done with his permission. However, when he behaves in this way, the hypnotist requests that he try to prevent himself from doing what the hypnotist asks and acknowledge that he can’t. The challenge forces him to abandon meta-complementary behavior. Whichever way the subject tries to define his relationship with the hypnotist, he finds the hypnotist refusing to accept that type of relationship.

The hypothesis offered here seems to have reached an impasse at this point. It was said earlier that all behavior of a person defines his type of relationship with another and it was then said that all relationships can be classified as either symmetrical, complementary, or meta-complementary. Now it is said that the trance subject’s behavior does not define the relationship in any of these ways. A way out of this impasse is possible when it is seen that the subject is not behaving. All of his behavior is labeled as not his behavior, and so he cannot be indicating what sort of relationship he is in. The goal of the hypnotist is precisely this: to prevent the subject from controlling what sort of relationship they have. He prevents the subject from defining the relationship as symmetrical, complementary, or meta-complementary by inducing him to negate or deny that behavior that would define the relationship. If Mr. A is responding to Mr. B, the very existence of that response defines the relationship as complementary. However, if Mr. A responds to Mr. B and denies that he is responding, then his response is not defining his relationship. The behavior of the subject in trance does not define a particular kind of relationship but indicates that the subject is not defining the relationship at all. The control of what sort of relationship it is rests with the hypnotist, and this differentiates the hypnotic relationship from all others.

To clarify and differentiate the hypnotic relationship from others, a diagram can be drawn that represents any relationship. When any two people meet for the first time and begin to interact with each other
all sorts of messages are potentially possible between them. They may interchange insults, compliments, sexual passes, rejecting statements, violent blows, and so on. All of these potential kinds of interaction are represented in Figure 1 by Xs. As the two people interact, they work out between them what sort of behavior, or what sort of messages, are to take place between them. They agree that certain messages are not to occur in this relationship and that other kinds are to be included. Thus they draw a line differentiating what is to take place in this particular relationship and what is not. This is represented by the line in the diagram that includes some X’s and excludes others. For example, if Mr. A criticizes Mr. B, thereby placing criticism from him within the frame of the relationship, Mr. B may say “I won’t take criticism from you,” thereby excluding it from the relationship. If Mr. A agrees to this, then criticism by him is outside the line rather than in it. Human interaction consists of mutual behavior that indicates where this line is to be drawn.

All the items of behavior, or messages, interchanges by two people can be classified as behavior that defines the relationship as symmetrical or behavior that defines it as complementary. Thus an X in Figure 1 becomes a member of the class “complementary” or the class “symmetrical.” A criticism by Mr. A indicates a complementary relationship, and Mr. B’s refusal to accept it indicates a symmetrical relationship. In this way the two people work out what sort of relationship it is, complementary or symmetrical, by what sort of behavior they agree shall be included within the relationship. Figure 2 represents a hypothetically extreme complementary relationship.

Any two people interacting are constantly working out what sort of behavior is to take place in the relationship. However, they are working out a higher level problem: who is to decide, or control, what sort of behavior is to take place. As they behave with each other, each message by the fact of its existence implies that it belongs in the relationship. At the same time each message is qualified by other messages that indicate such ideas as “This message belongs in our relationship,” or “Does
this message belong in our relationship?” or “This message belongs in our relationship whether you like it or not.” Implicit in these qualifying messages is an attempt to work out who is to decide what message, or type of behavior, is to take place in this relationship. In a normal relationship this deciding is shared. A offers a message, B counters with one of his own, and each indicates that he is deciding what behavior is to take place and therefore what sort of relationship it is.

What differentiates the hypnotic relationship from others is the mutual agreement that is worked out that the hypnotist is to control what sort of behavior is to take place. All behavior from the subject is either initiated by the hypnotist or if the subject does initiate some behavior it is labeled as not being initiated by him. To avoid controlling what sort of behavior is to take place, the subject must qualify what he does with denials that he is doing it, that it is being done, or that it is being done in this place and time. Thus at the qualifying level he is behaving in those ways that avoid defining the relationship by avoiding the implication that his behavior is done in relationship to the hypnotist. The hypnotist takes control not only of the behavior that takes place but of the qualifications of that behavior. A diagram of the hypnotic relationship would look like Figure 3C.

By placing whatever happens in the relationship within a meta-complementary frame, the outer circle in the diagram, the hypnotist completely controls what sort of behavior is to take place and therefore where the relationship line is to be drawn. The trance is successful when the subject communicates the messages requested by the hypnotist, qualifies those messages with denials that he is communicating them and therefore denies that he is defining the relationship, and thereby acknowledges that the hypnotist is in control of the definition of the relationship. This is, of course, a statement about a hypothetically ideal hypnotic relationship. In practice no subject will let a hypnotist take complete control of the relationship.

When the hypnotic subject avoids defining his relationship with the hypnotist, he appears to experience a variety of subjective experiences at the perceptual and somatic level. His perception of himself, the world, time and space, and the behavior of other people undergoes distortions that seem to occur outside of his control and often outside of his awareness. This paper has not dealt with the nature or extent of these presumed distortions but rather an attempt has been made to describe the interpersonal context in that they occur. Such an attempt has relevance outside the field of hypnosis. Many types of psychopathology are characterized by intrapsychic distortions so similar to those that occur in hypnotic trance that hypnotic subjects are often used to demonstrate psychiatric symptoms. If less emphasis is put upon the intrapsychic processes of patients and more on their behavior within a relationship, it is conceivable that a descriptive system can be developed that will
classify the interpersonal situations that provoke many clinical symptoms. Although the hypnotic relationship is a unique type, the peculiar kinds of communication sequences that occur between hypnotist and subject may be found outside the hypnotic situation in the personal relationships of individuals. Presumably when more exact descriptions of human interaction are developed, the interpersonal situations that provoke intrapsychic disturbances will be better understood.

**Summary**

An interactional description of the hypnotic situation has been presented with special emphasis on the relationship between hypnotist and subject as they communicate with one another. The communicative behavior of hypnotist and subject was described in terms of the ways they behave and the ways they qualify that behavior. These two levels of communication function together to define the sort of relationship they have with each other. It was suggested that the hypnotist communicates two contradictory levels of message to the subject in a situation where the subject must respond, cannot comment on the contradictory requests, and cannot leave the field. This double-level communication of the hypnotist was termed a “double bind.” Induction techniques and “challenges” were described as requests that the subject do something and simultaneous requests that he not do them. The response of the subject is to do them and deny he is doing them and thereby manifest “involuntary” or trance behavior. The “involuntary” was defined as actions by the subject qualified by statements that the subject did not make those actions. His qualifying statements consist of statements that he did not do something, that something was not done, that it was not done for the hypnotist, or that it was not done in this time and place. The hypnotic relationship was classified as meta-complementary within a framework of three possible types of relationship. It was argued that trance behavior takes place when the hypnotist controls what sort of relationship he has with the subject and the subject cannot indicate what sort of relationship it is. The perceptual and somatic experiences of the hypnotic subject were considered a product of this kind of relationship with the emphasis on the interaction, which is observable, rather than on the subjective experiences of the subject, which are conjecture.

**Reference**

Eine interaktionelle Erklärung der Hypnose

Jay Haley


Une explication interactionnelle de l’hypnose

Jay Haley

Résumé: Dans cet article, Jay Haley propose ce qu’il considère comme une nouvelle approche de la compréhension ou de la définition de l’hypnose. À partir de ses travaux effectués en collaboration avec Gregory Bateson, John Weakland, Don Jackson et Bill Fry, il met l’accent sur l’aspect communicatif relationnel de la transe. Notant la difficulté inhérente à l’étude d’une expérience subjective, Haley souligne à nouveau l’importance de la communication et de la relation thérapeute-patient.

Una explicación interaccional sobre la hipnosis

Jay Haley

Resumen: En este artículo, Jay Haley ofrece lo que él ve como un nuevo acercamiento al entendimiento o la definición de hipnosis. A partir de su trabajo con Gregory Bateson, John Weakland, Don Jackson, y Bill Fry, enfatiza el aspecto relacional comunicativo del trance. Notando la dificultad inherente de estudiar la experiencia subjetiva, Haley enfatiza nuevamente la importancia de la comunicación y la relación terapeuta-paciente.