



Who Am I Hypnotizing?

We are more complex than we present ourselves to be,
and unfamiliar parts of ourselves often respond.

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*“Life is like a landscape. You live in the midst of it,
but can describe it only from a distance.”*

— Charles Lindbergh

Hypnosis is a State, Not a Process

There has long been a discussion about what hypnosis is. This is generally resolved by noting the difference between the process of being hypnotized and the state of being in hypnosis. We describe the first with reference to many mechanical procedures, but the second, the internal state, continues to defy

any complete description.

The state of hypnosis is not a process; it is not the assured result of any process. We've recently gained new insight into the hypnotic state through neurological profiles of the brains of people in hypnosis. Some neuropsychologically inclined practitioners think this has brought us close to understanding the hypnotized state, but I feel that it has not done much to enlighten us.

A question that's not asked is who are we hypnotizing? There is some recognition that the notion of a person is ambiguous. In the 1970s, Ernest and Josephine Hilgard proposed that a "hidden observer" was present in the mind of someone in a hypnotic state. This hidden observer was said to be always present and more aware than our conscious self. Since the 1980s, little has been written about our normal, multiple identities.

"Dissociation can no longer be viewed only like a pathological 'entity' to be gotten 'rid of, but as a basic given which we should learn to use more effectively."

— **John O. Behrs M.D.** (1983)

This topic is overlooked. If our personalities are normally multiplicative, and hypnosis is selective about how it affects them, then who is getting hypnotized? Are we, as facilitators, in control of who we are hypnotizing, and are we even aware of who is hypnotized?



More Than One Observer

The hidden observer is noticed when a hypnotically insensate person responds cogently. That happens when a person who appears to be in a non-responsive trance responds using some unusual form of communication. Then, after emerging from their hypnotic trance, has no knowledge that they heard or saw anything, or responded to anything.

This does not establish the existence of two levels, it establishes at least two levels. It shows there is more than one awareness present, but it doesn't show there are two. It is likely there are others. A person under general anesthesia is also aware of what's going on around them. They can't speak or respond, and they may not recall, but sometimes they can recall, and recall details. It's unclear if the awareness a person maintains when comatose is the same that persists in a waking trance, but I suspect it's not the same. This brings us back to the notion of identity.

We identify people as aware and responsible beings. We excuse the many autonomous actions performed by people who are distressed, deranged, or asleep. Such people are “not entirely there,” we say, yet that's where many people spend most of their time. Our personalities are layered structures, but the layers are often incomplete.

In many of our games where we throw things back and forth across a net—tennis, badminton, volley ball, ping pong—we are challenged to be wherever the ball arrives in order to return it. We are everywhere behind our net, until we fail, and then it's clear we were not “there.”

Compare this to our personality. We are expected to return a comment with thoughtful presence. Even if we don't speak or act, we're expected to understand. It's presumed that we "are" everywhere behind our "net." When we're not—because we cannot hear or think—we are suspected of being disabled, dysfunctional, or otherwise "out to lunch." It's expected that we can serve any idea and return any volley. We're excused for lack of knowledge, lapses of memory, or in cases of extreme upset.

In truth, this "complete personality" of ours is little more than a moving tennis racket, a small focal point of awareness that shapes itself to appear to understand whatever concept you throw at it, but which has little existence beyond that. You rarely think more than one thought at one time, and you rely on an internal integrity to maintain consistency in what you remember and how you act.

This "tennis racket" of yours, the "who" who you present yourself to be, is traded off between personalities. You respond to superficial comments from shallow personalities by making off-handed comments. You display reflex reactions that take little thought and leave few traces in your memory. Tough questions and emotional remarks call forward different aspects of your personality. Aspects that are rarely present under normal circumstances.

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Relaxation is a Beginning

I have clients interested in finding themselves. I always wonder what they mean when they tell me this. They say they're coming to me because what they read about me indicates I'll be able to help them. I wonder what they're thinking?

Jane moves away from those she is close to. She's lived in many countries and, though she has grown children and has had partners, she lives far from all of them. She is interested in building honest, quality relationships but finds herself in situations that are lacking. Even in her professional relationships, she works with people who do not meet her reasonable moral standards.

As a therapist, I don't know what's true. I only hear your story and go with it. I will ask questions and explore beyond what you might show me, but I have to work with what I find. People don't entirely make sense at a deeper level, and some people have a variety of dissimilar presentations. You have built a picture you present to the world, and I get a usually larger and more honest view of your thoughts, but it's still far from complete. I presume you are an incomplete puzzle, and neither you nor I have all the pieces.

To find out what bothered Jane, I led her on a guided visualization, but before I started I spent almost 30 minutes relaxing her. I follow an extended program for relaxation. I recognize that every aspect of your personality carries different forms of stress, and I want to relax as much of your personality as possible.

In hypnotherapy, there is a method called Progressive Relaxation, which relieves muscular stress. I take this further by assuming that all the areas of your body play psychological roles and express emotional attitudes. Your spine holds conflict, lungs hold grief, the digestive system holds anger, the voice holds self-confidence, your eyes hold emotional focus, and so on.

Different people are more engaged with or blocked by stress in different areas. I could draw your attention to every muscle, bone, joint, tissue, process, and organ in your body, and this process could take hours. I focus on those areas and processes that present themselves as relevant to a person's issues. When dealing with a person whose issues are vague, I search their body for tension and sensitivity.

I get a basic picture of what my clients like and dislike, and I use these as backdrops in the exploration of their feelings. In Jane's case, this exploration included places she liked and disliked. I asked her to conjure these surroundings and imagine they presented her with alternatives, like paths diverging in the woods, or doors to different rooms. I was mapping the territory of the emotionally positive and negative using her reactions to her imagination.



Who Is Emotional?

As I narrated the creation of what I thought was a neutral environment, Jane got sad and teary. She had told me that she didn't like deep water, and I asked her to imagine that she was able to descend to shipwrecks at the bottom of the sea. I was exploring an imaginary realm, while she was in emotional distress.

At one point, we encountered a door to a deep, black space. The portal to a void she did not want to enter, and so we did not. We went somewhere else. Yet wherever we went, Jane was in distress. I tried to paint happy pictures, but she saw them darkly. We entered a hut in the woods with a chest, and she was afraid to open it, so we didn't.

The point of these visualizations is not to make real what seems out of reach, though that is possible. The intent is to create an emotional environment that contains symbols that can be explored. Doors you don't want to enter and chests you don't want to open are a bit like beds that have monsters beneath them. You don't actually need to go there because "there" is the symbol. Your preconception of what is there is just that, a preconception. Maybe it will have a reality, but probably it won't, at least not yet. You create your monsters when you decide when you're ready to meet them, and you don't necessarily have to.

There were several layers in this visualization. It contained the stated associations, like blue sky and warm sun, and unstated associated feelings, such as of distress, or incongruous symbols, like frightening chests. Furthermore, as with dreams, the mind plays word games in which a chest could be one's own chest, and a path could be the decisions that you've made.

Jane had a story of her life's situations, and Jane had an emotional geography that was like a museum of living symbols. The two overlaid each other and, as I traveled on one, she traveled on another. What was the relationship between her images and her feelings, between the imaginary story that we built and the feelings that arose in her?

Maybe it was her hidden observer that was emotional while her intellectual self was detached. Or it could be that my evocation of her somatic emotions transformed our visual exploration into something I could not imagine, but she could. What did that chest mean, and is there something beyond it?

I thought I was putting the conscious Jane into a hypnotic state, but whom did I really hypnotize? After our session was finished—it had gone on for two hours, but it still felt too short—Jane said she was surprised at how real it felt. The experience was not just imaginal, it was as if she was really there. She said she felt lighter, and she looked it.

Hypnosis creates or draws out deeper meanings. The process is therapeutic, but not intellectual. It's not psychology in the sense that it's not a study, it's not a repeatable exploration of the facts. It can be transformative and, in doing so, it can alter the client's personality.

The experience alters me, too, as an observer. I am reminded that not only is my client less of who they pretend to be, but I may be engaging parts of them I've never met. This therapy is not reductive, it's creative.

References

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