

The Evolution of Hypnotherapy

A Review of a Talk by Dr. Weitzenhoffer

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On March 18th, 1994, Dr. Andre M. Weitzenhoffer, noted scientist, clinician, author, and teacher, gave a talk entitled "The Evolution of Hypnotism from de Puysegur to Erickson" as part of NYSEPH's ongoing series on leaders in hypnotism. He presented Erickson's contribution to hypnotism within a scientific historical perspective and discussed various aspects of Milton Erickson's contributions to hypnosis of which many contemporary Ericksonians are unaware.

Dr. Weitzenhoffer has a unique background from which to discuss hypnotism and Erickson's innovative contributions. First, he is a prominent scientist as well as a clinician. Weitzenhoffer, along with Ernest Hilgard, created the Stanford Scales of Hypnotic Susceptibility on which much scientific research in hypnotism is based, and conducted numerous other research projects on hypnosis. Furthermore, in contrast to many contemporary Ericksonian leaders who knew Milton Erickson only in his later years, Dr. Weitzenhoffer had a close personal and professional relationship with both Erickson and his wife from 1954 to 1976, thus giving him a very broad understanding of Erickson's work and his development.

The development of hypnotism, Dr. Weitzenhoffer said, involved a combination of many fortuitous accidents as well as rigorous research. Many creative, innovative persons prepared the way for Erickson's contributions. It all began accidentally in 1784 when the Marquis de Puysegur noted a sleep-Ike condition he called somnambulism, resulting from using magnetic techniques developed by the later discredited Mesmer. In 1841 the British surgeon James Braid saw an exhibition of artificial somnambulism and felt something real had happened, unrelated to animal magnetism. He produced the same state by having subjects stare at a bright object and experimented with the phenomenon, reporting highly impressive results-such as conducting surgery without anesthesia and curing congenital blindness and deafness. He discovered and used arm catalepsy as a test for the presence of hypnosis long before Erickson did. Braid understood the concept of suggestion. In fact, he conducted research showing that suggestion, not animal magnetism, caused Mesmer's results. Surprisingly he did not recognize its application to his own cures, leaving that to later researchers. He did, however, coin the word "neuro-hypnotism," and thus defined the beginning of hypnosis.

Over the next several decades many persons explored hypnotism scientifically. For example, Broca conducted major surgery under hypnosis that was reported in the medical literature, and Janet developed a dissociation theory of hypnotic behavior.

In 1860 Liebault stated that all hypnotic phenomena were produced by suggestion. Bernheim later joined him in his thinking and became a partner at his clinic in Nancy

treating people with hypnosis. In 1884 Bernheim published a book stating, among other ideas, that all hypnotic phenomena are produced by suggestion, that suggestion exists independently of hypnosis, and that hypnosis is a normal, not a pathological, condition. Borrowing from earlier works the idea of ideomotor action, he gave it a prominent position as a mechanism of suggestion. He saw this as largely dependent on the functioning of an "inferior psychism" which is really a counterpart of Erickson's unconscious.

By the time Erickson became interested in hypnotism, Bernheim's influence was significant throughout Europe and the United States, Weitzenhoffer said. It seems highly likely, he felt, that Erickson was influenced by him, especially when we consider some of the ideas Erickson developed - for example, the separation of trance and suggestion, the stress on ideomotor action, and the role of unconscious processes, as had been discussed by Bernheim. Just as we call ourselves Ericksonians, Weitzenhoffer says, Erickson could, in his early days, have been called a Bernheimian.

As mentioned, Dr. Weitzenhoffer was deeply involved with Erickson for many years. Many Ericksonians are unaware, he said, that Erickson was once a researcher and that he produced some outstanding research papers. One of the most significant was his experimental production by hypnosis of the psychopathology of everyday life that Freud had written about. In all his experience, Weitzenhoffer said, he has not known a single Ericksonian who has read this paper, and he feels this causes a real gap in a full appreciation of Erickson's contribution to hypnosis.

In 1958 Milton Erickson founded the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis and stopped research in order to teach hypnosis to as many people as possible. Dr. Weitzenhoffer was on the faculty of some of his workshops.

In those days Erickson felt it important to convince people that hypnosis was safe and easy. As Weitzenhoffer himself witnessed, many people were afraid of the power and responsibility of hypnosis that they connected with direct suggestions, and they left the training. This difficulty, as well as the wide range of clinical situations Erickson encountered working with many therapists and all of their patients, prompted him to become even more creative than he had been before in developing new techniques to help both the patients' problems and the therapists' anxieties. Among his many innovations he developed the indirect suggestion to get around the patient's resistance. Weitzenhoffer believes he may have stressed the notion of trusting the patient's unconscious in order to relieve therapists' fears of the power of hypnosis and encourage them to use it comfortably.

As a scientist, Dr. Weitzenhoffer is concerned about the confusion in terminology and concepts that pervades the behavioral sciences, including hypnotism, causing fuzzy thinking and impeding scientific development. The current use of the word "hypnosis" to signify both the state as well as anything that has to do with the state is confusing, he feels. He prefers to use different words to distinguish the two concepts - i.e. "hypnosis" denotes the state, and "hypnotism" describes its study, production, and utilization.

He also feels it important to distinguish between Erickson as a hypnotist and Erickson as a therapist. For example, utilization, the acceptance of whatever the patient offers, is Erickson's most important contribution, Weitzenhoffer feels. "It has great

value, but it is important to recognize that it is a therapeutic concept, not hypnosis", he said. Similarly, according to Weitzenhoffer, many of Erickson's other creative contributions stem from his genius as a therapist, not as a hypnotist, and it would help clarify matters on the scientific level to distinguish between the two. (Persons interested in knowing more about this are referred to Dr. Weitzenhoffer's article entitled "Ericksonian Myths" which will be published soon in the proceedings of the Fifth International Congress on Ericksonian Approaches to Hypnosis and Psychotherapy by Brunner/Mazel).

A final consideration was Weitzenhoffer's view of Erickson as interpreted by his followers. Many people who studied with Erickson did not understand his actions. They constantly pushed him to explain himself and were often frustrated by his vague replies. At times, Weitzenhoffer said, people, including himself, felt too frustrated and embarrassed to say they didn't understand.

Although Erickson sometimes did explain his interventions" he often worked intuitively. Weitzenhoffer feels that Milton Erickson himself did not always understand why he did as he did. He was, however, under great pressure to give explanations. Weitzenhoffer wondered at times if he responded vaguely just to give closure to the questioners and to get the pressure off himself.

In Erickson's later years, as his followers were writing books with him to explain his methods, he was physically very weak. Weitzenhoffer said he knows for a fact that Erickson did not read his collaborators' writings closely, if at all. He wondered if he would have agreed with many of their statements had he had the capacity to review them. It is therefore important to remember as we read the books written in collaboration his students that we may be learning their interpretations of Erickson's ideas, not necessarily the ideas themselves.

Although Dr. Weitzenhoffer is now retired, he is as busy as he ever was. He recently completed a two-volume series that interested persons may wish to read: *The Practice of Hypnotism*. Volume One and Volume Two, John Wiley & Sons, 1989.

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