

**From Mesmer to Erickson**  
**A Brief History of Hypnosis**  
By David Shephard

Over the last few years I have noticed, as you may have done too, a resurgence in the interest in hypnosis. It most certainly is gaining increasing acceptance as a powerful tool for psychological and in some cases physiological change. On many of my hypnosis trainings I am asked, "Where did hypnosis come from, and how did it get to where it is today?" So here is a brief history of hypnosis:

**Meditation in India and the Egyptian Sleep Temples**

The name Hypnosis did not come into being until the mid 1800's, though there were other methods of inducing altered states of consciousness before that date. You could say that hypnosis predates Mesmer by several thousand years. There is a record of Egyptians inducing altered states of consciousness by looking at the light of the Sun through a spinning disc with holes cut into it. The fixation of attention and rapidly pulsating light inducing a trance like state in the user. Also, many of us cannot distinguish the state induced by meditation and the use of a mantra and that produced by self hypnosis.

**Memer and the "Stokers"**

In the 1500's Paracelsus was inducing trance in people and healing them by passing magnets over their bodies. A hundred or so years later Valentine Braithwaite, known as "The Great Irish Stroker" was healing others by again passing magnets over their bodies. However, it was not until the mid 1700's that magnetic passes were brought to the public eye by Franz Anton Mesmer. Mesmer was interested in Newtonian Physics and was studying the affect of the planet's gravitational fields on the human mind. As part of the studies he observed two local celebrities at the University of Vienna, Johann Gassner, a maverick priest who performed public exorcisms and Maximillian Hehl, Professor of Astronomy at the University who could control blood flow from wounds by passing magnets over them. Mesmer was convinced that both feats were achieved by magnetism and he started his own experiments, quickly to discover that he too could control the flow of blood from wounds, and more importantly without the use of magnets. He was still convinced that some form of magnetism must be involved and he coined the term "Animal Magnetism".

Mesmer went on to heal hundreds of people with his mesmeric passes, even enabling patients to safely and painlessly undergo surgery after being subjected to Animal Magnetism for up to 48 hours. In 1784 a Royal Commission was set up by Louis XVI to investigate Mesmer. The commission was chaired by Benjamin Franklin. The commission debunked Mesmer and Animal Magnetism on the grounds that it couldn't be seen. Benjamin

Franklin, of course, then went on to discover electricity, something else he couldn't see! The commission could not refute the results that Mesmer's patients gained; these were credited to Mesmer's patient's imagination rather than Animal Magnetism.

It was really Armand Charcot, Marquis de Puységur, who established the practice of Mesmerism as it became known. Puységur used it to treat the tenants and local peasants on his estate. He found that he could put his patients into a state very much like the state that people are in when they are sleep walking. In that they appeared to be asleep but when they were asked to do certain actions they would. Because of this he used the term Somnambulism to describe what he did.

### **Mesmerist in England and the creation of the name Hypnosis**

In the early 1800's a number of people were using mesmerism to conduct painless surgery and dentistry. The medical community continued to deny that mesmerism was of any use in this area and added that even if it was of use, it would be very dangerous for the patient.

In 1838 a medical doctor by the name of Elliotson was experimenting with mesmerism at University College London. He wrote a book detailing his findings.

A Scottish surgeon John Esdaile, however, was demonstrating what was possible. He conducted more than 300 operations in India with the assistance of a mesmerist. There were no fatalities that could be accounted for by the use of mesmerism, and in fact in general there were fewer fatalities than would be expected and his patients recovered more rapidly than was usual. Due to his results Esdaile was promoted to Surgeon of the East India Company in 1846, but by this time anaesthetics had become available so his work was ignored and the medical journals declined from printing his findings.

James Braid, a Scottish eye doctor, read Elliotson's book and set out to debunk mesmerism and so went to investigate Elliotson. He found that there was some validity in the state Elliotson induced in his clients. One day as he entered his surgery he noticed that one of his patients was in the waiting room and his attention was fixated on a lamp. Braid gave him a number of instructions, to close his eyes and go to sleep, which his patient dutifully did. Braid announced that animal magnetism wasn't required to create the trance like state and that it could be created by the neurophysiological processes activated by fixating the attention. He called this process of trance induction, Neurypnology. In 1843 Braid published a book called Neurypnology. He later changed the name to Hypnosis, meaning nervous sleep. This was the first time the name Hypnosis was used.

## **Charcot and Nancy School**

Braid had given hypnotism some credibility, so Jean Martin Charcot, the leading neurologist of the time felt it was safe to experiment with Bradism, as it became known in France. Charcot's patients exhibited conditions similar to epileptic seizures when in a trance. He concluded that hypnosis was an inducted form of seizure that only hysterics were susceptible to. He also concluded that hysteria was in fact an organic condition of brain deterioration. The medical community was delighted Charcot had put Mesmerism and Braidism in their place, hysteria was not a recognised disease which they no longer needed to be embarrassed at diagnosing and also got them off the hook as far as treating it since it was organic in nature.

However, Charcot's findings were soon to be found to be fallacious, by the work of a country doctor practising in Nancy, Ambrose Auguste Liebault. Liebault said to his patients that he could either treat them with drugs for which they would have to pay or he could treat them with hypnosis which would be free. His patients naturally went for hypnosis. Liebault gave them soothing, sleep inducing suggestions and then gave them further suggestions intended to remove their symptoms. So successful was Liebault's method that it attracted one of Professor Bernheim's dissatisfied patients. Bernheim ran the hospital in Nancy. Hearing that his patients had been successfully cured he went to investigate. He was so convinced by what he saw that he adopted it at the Nancy Hospital and literally hundreds of patients were treated by him and Liebault. None of their patients exhibited Charcot's predicted seizures or fits. This seriously disturbed the medical profession's peace of mind, the methods were very successful and it didn't require medicines. Also it was successfully curing organic disorders which medical students, at this time, were being taught were incurable.

## **Freud and Hypnotism**

Freud had become fascinated by the use of Hypnosis when he was working with Charcot and had seen some amazing demonstrations of its use in France. He started to use hypnosis himself; however, he wasn't particularly good at it since he had a rather prominent lisp due to ill fitting dentures. He eventually abandoned hypnosis and developed his "talking tour", where the therapist says very little and leaves the patient to do the talking. He later postulated that the cause for all neurosis was the subject's sexual life and that the unconscious mind was the root of everything evil, dirty and nasty. This theory of the unconscious mind became widely accepted in psychiatry and by the public in general.

Freud's refuting of Hypnosis and the wide spread acceptance of his psychoanalytical methods dealt hypnosis yet another blow.

## **Everyday in every way, I get better and better**

By the beginning of 1900 the use of hypnosis was in decline, the only promising development was auto-suggestion in the 1920's. This was developed out of the original work carried out at the Nancy School by Emile Coue. Coue a French chemist became interested when he gave a patient coloured water instead of a drug he was not permitted to administer. The patient's symptoms disappeared. In 1885 he went to the Nancy School and was convinced that suggestion under hypnosis was very effective. But he hadn't induced a trance in the patient that he gave the coloured water to. The patient's imagination must have created the cure themselves. His name became internationally known, along with his famous suggestion, "everyday in every way, I get better and better".

## **"Everything that presupposes trance causes trance" – Clark Hull**

In the USA Clark Hull was performing important research into hypnosis. He wanted to prove that the hypnotist himself had little affect on the client. Hull developed a standard induction so that everyone used the same words, with the same intonation, and speed of speech. He eventually recorded a standard induction on a phonogram and played the record to his patients. He concluded from his research that not everyone could be hypnotised. One of Hull's students at this time was Milton Erickson. Hull and Erickson disagreed on their methods of hypnosis as Erickson was already beginning to develop his famous indirect permissive approach to hypnosis. The idea of inducing trance by using a standard induction with everyone went against Erickson's view of utilising each individual client's natural ability to go into trance.

In 1930 Hull published a book entitled Hypnosis and Suggestibility in which he sited a major understanding of hypnosis. From his research he had found that anything that presupposes trance causes trance. This really answered many of the questions of how earlier methods of trance induction had worked. If the client was given something to do which required trance to do it, then they would go into a trance.

In 1943 George Estabrook published a book, Hypnotism. In it he detailed his research into whether hypnotic subjects would perform actions that were against their personal wishes or values. Estabrook postulated that in fact subjects would do actions against their wishes. This book formed the basis of the "Manchurian Candidate" film, in which an unwilling volunteer is hypnotised and "programmed" to assassinate someone.

In this book, Estabrook also wrote that hypnotic subjects would only manifest results that were within the beliefs of the hypnotist.