

Invited Article

Notes from a Psychology Watcher: Words that Harm, Words that Heal

Michele Ritterman, Ph.D.

Ed. Note: The following article was contributed by Michele Ritterman at the request of the editor. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the opinions of the Milton H. Erickson Foundation.

Using Hypnosis in Family Therapy (Ritterman, 1983) exposed microdynamics in the relationship between individual symptoms and family suggestive processes, conscious and automatic. I tracked specific symptoms back to unique, but naturally occurring hypnotic patterns and focused on the destructive suggestions families made. My study of Ericksonian and other hypnotherapies gave me a sense of how self-suggestion leads to rigid mental-sets and how families contribute to the cause of problems. But what about the broader social context?

I was aware that symptoms are affected outside of families by social forces ranging from institutionalized racism to religion. I lacked the necessary psychological zoom-lens to scrutinize, at the moment of impact, the results of a specific social suggestion on an individual. The research I conducted for *Hope Under Siege* (Ritterman, 1991) helped me to begin to design that lens.

Hypnosis: Abused by Totalitarian Governments

I looked for an incontestable case in which society used hypnosis-like techniques to hurt a person. The only well-documented and unquestionably destructive use of state apparatus upon an individual is torture. According to Amnesty International, torture is used by governments in one-third of the countries of the world. Hypnotic and other scientifically refined methods are routinely abused as part of state violence. It is well known that these methods are designed *not* for information gathering, but for people-breaking.

Initially, I studied what state-sponsored harming did to Salvadorans in the U.S., Costa Rica and Nicaragua. I learned how government-mandated cruelty changed, often permanently, personalities, moods, and range of usable mental states. Even without physical abuse, after professional psychological mistreatment by the state, survivors were never again who they once were. At this time I wrote "Symptoms, Social

Justice and Personal Freedom" (Ritterman, 1985) my first professional foray into the social-hypnosis-symptom links.

In 1986, I was invited to Chile by a group of relatives of the tortured, imprisoned and disappeared who had banded together under the dictatorship there. Chile was different from El Salvador in that hypnosis and other forms of psychological abuse were much more routinely employed by the medical attachés to the investigative police. It was in Chile, surrounded by scores of survivors of all forms of torture that I realized I was the wrong person for the job I had undertaken. I feared I could become a hateful person. My subject was unravelling me.

I wrote "Torture: The Counter Therapy of the State" (Ritterman, 1987) and began to study a Chilean survivor, a young man who had been disoriented and manhandled in every imaginable manner. He was under a death sentence when I met him, and had a positive, even humane attitude. I began to look at the flip side of my original question: how can an individual or family resist when the state wields against them its technical forces and its psychological suggestions of hate?

Hypnotists and the Power of Words

I studied how this young Chilean man immunized himself against the daily denigrations wielded against him by a government. Most fascinating was that his mother, a literate shantytown dweller, studied hypnosis. On family visits, this woman often hypnotized her son and provided suggestions about feeling loved and mentally leaving the harshness of his physical conditions. His wife, son, mother, sister, and brothers drew an emotional net around him, countering the otherwise annihilative suggestions with words imbued with his importance to them, and messages of strength, worth and dignity.

I had set out to study how social forces can break down, degrade and destabilize citizens and ended up intrigued with the power of a cooperative family to break the spell of the injunctions of a totalitarian state.

It is important to mention that hypnotists may especially well grasp the extent to which hateful, even indifferent suggestions, words, metaphors and symbols are integrated into any planned violation. Physical abuse often is only the tip of the iceberg.

When brutality is carried out with indifference, as when the torturer applying electric shock to a person's genitals

takes a break to chat with his wife over the telephone about dinner, the unconscious mind of the harmed person receives a profound and lasting indirect suggestion that his/her suffering, much less the heroics and good luck of enduring, is trivial.

State Suggestive Forces

Especially from my years of study in Chile, but also in South Africa (from 1986-1990), I learned that when social control and *not* government accountability is the name of the game, the state must work on the unconscious minds of its citizens to occupy their daily reveries and narrow their range of mental states. Fear, terror and hate are necessary mental states for various sectors of the population and become primary political goals. The police-controlled media are employed to send the needed direct and subliminal messages, as are the military-run universities, hospitals and so on. Loyalty to the state must replace love even of family, as well as fear, curiosity, terror, and ambition.

Is There an Applicability of All This to the United States?

I think *Hope Under Siege* applies to life here in two ways. First, considering the rise of hate movements, and the neglect of public health and education, the cornerstone of an effective democracy, we in North America need to think broadly about hypnosis, learning its macro- as well as its micro-dynamics. Any society sends messages to its citizens about how to act, and even how to feel. Torture chambers are only the extreme end of the line in government controls. Hate, suggested directly or indirectly by officials, will produce psychophysiological responses in most people and may lead to seemingly automatic behavioral responses, from cross-burnings to reactions of hurt and outrage.

Second, the social context in which hypnotherapy occurs charges the hypnotist client relationship. Ericksonian hypnotherapy could not be used by a torturer or anyone else in a totalitarian regime because from start to finish it is designed to empower the subject, not the hypnotist.

I remember Jay Haley used to say it was a good thing Milton Erickson was not a despot because of the tremendous charisma of his (fortunately) benevolent personality. Ericksonian therapy is rooted in a democratic philosophy based on assumptions of equality, justice and mutual respect. In Chile under Pinochet, victims of state-hypnosis were not open to hypnosis in subsequent therapy. The

process of induction itself became as toxic to them as electric wires may be to those who were electrically tortured.

When I went to Denmark to meet the director of the first international torture treatment center, Dr. Inge Kemp Genefke, I was told that she did not want to meet me because she was told I had come to discuss the applicability of hypnosis to torture treatment. She said hypnosis was what torturers did, and therapy was the opposite of that: empowerment of the subject. I told her I was part of a new hypnosis movement that shared her same aspirations. We began our dialogue from there.

I would like to see national and international movements that preserve human dignity, fostering not only economic change but also imparting suggestions of sharing, caring, working together, universalism, laden with respect for cultural and religious differences. Imagine real social program provided hand in hand with some suggestions other than "Hate while you Wait." How about "To Live is to Give!"

Social suggestions, like those in individual hypnosis, can be used or abused. They are tools we have, and they are here to stay. How, when and why they are used need to become subjects of concern for humanity to prevent government abuse in the coming decades.

* * *

References

- (1) Ritterman, M. (1983). *Using Hypnosis in Family Therapy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- (2) Ritterman, M. (1991). *Hope Under Siege: Terror and Family Support in Chile*. Norwood, New Jersey: Able Publishing Co.
- (3) Ritterman, M. (1985). "Symptoms, Social Justice and Personal Freedom." *Journal of Strategic and Systemic Therapies*, 4, pp. 48-6.
- (4) Ritterman, M. (1987, January-February). "Torture: The Counter Therapy of the State." *Family Therapy Networker*, pp. 43-47.

* * *

Michele Ritterman, Ph.D., is a presenter at the Fifth International Congress in Phoenix in December. Hers is a uniquely broad social and intercultural perspective. Her books *Hope Under Siege* and *Using Hypnosis in Family Therapy* are available from RITTERMAN 3908 LAKE SHORE AVE., OAK, CA 94610 510-763-7309.

Invited Article

Notes from a Psychology Watcher: Words that Harm, Words that Heal

Michele Ritterman, Ph.D.

Ed. Note: The following article was contributed by Michele Ritterman at the request of the editor. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the opinions of the Milton H. Erickson Foundation.

Using *Hypnosis in Family Therapy* (Ritterman, 1983), I exposed microdynamics in the relationship between individual symptoms and family suggestive processes, conscious and automatic. I tracked specific symptoms back to unique, but naturally occurring hypnotic patterns and focused on the destructive suggestions families made. My study of Ericksonian and other hypnotherapies gave me a sense of how self-suggestion leads to rigid mental-sets and how families contribute to the cause of problems. But what about the broader social context?

I was aware that symptoms are affected outside of families by social forces ranging from institutionalized racism to religion. I lacked the necessary psychological zoom-lens to scrutinize, at the moment of impact, the results of a specific social suggestion on an individual. The research I conducted for *Hope Under Siege* (Ritterman, 1991) helped me to begin to design that lens.

Hypnosis: Abused by Totalitarian Governments

I looked for an incontestable case in which society used hypnosis-like techniques to hurt a person. The only well-documented and unquestionably destructive use of state apparatus upon an individual is torture. According to Amnesty International, torture is used by governments in one-third of the countries of the world. Hypnotic and other scientifically refined methods are routinely abused as part of state violence. It is well known that these methods are designed *not* for information gathering, but for people-breaking.

Initially, I studied what state-sponsored harming did to Salvadorans in the U.S., Costa Rica and Nicaragua. I learned how government-mandated cruelty changed, often permanently, personalities, moods, and range of usable mental states. Even without physical abuse, after professional psychological mistreatment by the state, survivors were never again who they once were. At this time I wrote "Symptoms, Social

Justice and Personal Freedom" (Ritterman, 1985); my first professional foray into the social-hypnosis-symptom links.

In 1986, I was invited to Chile by a group of relatives of the tortured, imprisoned and disappeared who had banded together under the dictatorship there. Chile was different from El Salvador in that hypnosis and other forms of psychological abuse were much more routinely employed by the medical attachés to the investigative police. It was in Chile, surrounded by scores of survivors of all forms of torture that I realized I was the wrong person for the job I had undertaken. I feared I could become a hateful person. My subject was unravelling me.

I wrote "Torture: The Counter Therapy of the State" (Ritterman, 1987); and began to study a Chilean survivor, a young man who had been disoriented and manhandled in every imaginable manner. He was under a death sentence when I met him, and had a positive, even humane attitude. I began to look at the flip side of my original question: how can an individual or family resist when the state wields against them its technical forces and its psychological suggestions of hate?

Hypnotists and the Power of Words

I studied how this young Chilean man immunized himself against the daily denigrations wielded against him by a government. Most fascinating was that his mother, a literate shantytown dweller, studied hypnosis. On family visits, this woman often hypnotized her son and provided suggestions about feeling loved and mentally leaving the harshness of his physical conditions. His wife, son, mother, sister, and brothers drew an emotional net around him, countering the otherwise annihilative suggestions with words imbued with his importance to them, and messages of strength, worth and dignity.

I had set out to study how social forces can break down, degrade and destabilize citizens and ended up intrigued with the power of a cooperative family to break the spell of the injunctions of a totalitarian state.

It is important to mention that hypnotists may especially well grasp the extent to which hateful, even indifferent suggestions, words, metaphors and symbols are integrated into any planned violation. Physical abuse often is only the tip of the iceberg.

When brutality is carried out with indifference, as when the torturer applying electric shock to a person's genitals

takes a break to chat with his wife over the telephone about dinner, the unconscious mind of the harmed person receives a profound and lasting indirect suggestion that his/her suffering, much less the heroics and good luck of enduring, is trivial.

State Suggestive Forces

Especially from my years of study in Chile, but also in South Africa (from 1986-1990), I learned that when social control and *not* government accountability is the name of the game, the state must work on the unconscious minds of its citizens to occupy their daily reveries and narrow their range of mental states. Fear, terror and hate are necessary mental states for various sectors of the population and become primary political goals. The police-controlled media are employed to send the needed direct and subliminal messages, as are the military-run universities, hospitals and so on. Loyalty to the state must replace love even of family, as well as fear, curiosity, terror, and ambition.

Is There an Applicability of All This to the United States?

I think *Hope Under Siege* applies to life here in two ways. First, considering the rise of hate movements, and the neglect of public health and education, the cornerstone of an effective democracy, we in North America need to think broadly about hypnosis, learning its macro- as well as its micro-dynamics. Any society sends messages to its citizens about how to act, and even how to feel. Torture chambers are only the extreme end of the line in government controls. Hate, suggested directly or indirectly by officials, will produce psychophysiological responses in most people and may lead to seemingly automatic behavioral responses, from cross-burnings to reactions of hurt and outrage.

Second, the social context in which hypnotherapy occurs charges the hypnotist client relationship. Ericksonian hypnotherapy could not be used by a torturer or anyone else in a totalitarian regime because from start to finish it is designed to empower the subject, not the hypnotist.

I remember Jay Haley used to say it was a good thing Milton Erickson was not a despot because of the tremendous charisma of his (fortunately) benevolent personality. Ericksonian therapy is rooted in a democratic philosophy based on assumptions of equality, justice and mutual respect. In Chile under Pinochet, victims of state-hypnosis were not open to hypnosis in subsequent therapy. The

process of induction itself became as toxic to them as electric wires may be to those who were electrically tortured.

When I went to Denmark to meet the director of the first international torture treatment center, Dr. Inge Kemp Genefke, I was told that she did not want to meet me because she was told I had come to discuss the applicability of hypnosis to torture treatment. She said hypnosis was what torturers did, and therapy was the opposite of that: empowerment of the subject. I told her I was part of a new hypnosis movement that shared her same aspirations. We began our dialogue from there.

I would like to see national and international movements that preserve human dignity, fostering not only economic change but also imparting suggestions of sharing, caring, working together, universalism, laden with respect for cultural and religious differences. Imagine real social programs provided hand in hand with some suggestions other than "Hate while you Wait." How about "To Live is to Give!"

Social suggestions, like those in individual hypnosis, can be used or abused. They are tools we have, and they are here to stay. How, when and why they are used need to become subjects of concern for humanity to prevent government abuse in the coming decades.

* * *

References

- (1) Ritterman, M. (1983). *Using Hypnosis in Family Therapy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- (2) Ritterman, M. (1991). *Hope Under Siege: Terror and Family Support in Chile*. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Co.
- (3) Ritterman, M. (1985). "Symptoms, Social Justice and Personal Freedom." *Journal of Strategic and Systemic Therapies*, 4, pp. 48-63.
- (4) Ritterman, M. (1987, January-February). "Torture: The Counter Therapy of the State." *Family Therapy Networker*, pp. 43-47.

* * *

Michele Ritterman, Ph.D., is a presenter at the Fifth International Congress in Phoenix in December. Hers is a uniquely broad social and intercultural perspective. Her books *Hope Under Siege*, and *Using Hypnosis in Family Therapy* are available from RITTERMAN 3908 LAKE SHORE AVE., DAK. CA. 94610 510-763-7309.

Invited Article

Notes from a Psychology Watcher: Words that Harm, Words that Heal

Michele Ritterman, Ph.D.

Ed. Note: The following article was contributed by Michele Ritterman at the request of the editor. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the opinions of the Milton H. Erickson Foundation.

Using Hypnosis in Family Therapy (Ritterman, 1983): exposed microdynamics in the relationship between individual symptoms and family suggestive processes, conscious and automatic. I tracked specific symptoms back to unique, but naturally occurring hypnotic patterns and focused on the destructive suggestions families made. My study of Ericksonian and other hypnotherapies gave me a sense of how self-suggestion leads to rigid mental-sets and how families contribute to the cause of problems. But what about the broader social context?

I was aware that symptoms are affected outside of families by social forces ranging from institutionalized racism to religion. I lacked the necessary psychological zoom-lens to scrutinize, at the moment of impact, the results of a specific social suggestion on an individual. The research I conducted for *Hope Under Siege* (Ritterman, 1991) helped me to begin to design that lens.

Hypnosis: Abused by Totalitarian Governments

I looked for an incontestable case in which society used hypnosis-like techniques to hurt a person. The only well-documented and unquestionably destructive use of state apparatus upon an individual is torture. According to Amnesty International, torture is used by governments in one-third of the countries of the world. Hypnotic and other scientifically refined methods are routinely abused as part of state violence. It is well known that these methods are designed *not* for information gathering, but for people-breaking.

Initially, I studied what state-sponsored harming did to Salvadorans in the U.S., Costa Rica and Nicaragua. I learned how government-mandated cruelty changed, often permanently, personalities, moods, and range of usable mental states. Even without physical abuse, after professional psychological mistreatment by the state, survivors were never again who they once were. At this time I wrote "Symptoms, Social

Justice and Personal Freedom" (Ritterman, 1985); my first professional foray into the social-hypnosis-symptom links.

In 1986, I was invited to Chile by a group of relatives of the tortured, imprisoned and disappeared who had banded together under the dictatorship there. Chile was different from El Salvador in that hypnosis and other forms of psychological abuse were much more routinely employed by the medical attachés to the investigative police. It was in Chile, surrounded by scores of survivors of all forms of torture that I realized I was the wrong person for the job I had undertaken. I feared I could become a hateful person. My subject was unravelling me.

I wrote "Torture: The Counter Therapy of the State" (Ritterman, 1987) and began to study a Chilean survivor, a young man who had been disoriented and manhandled in every imaginable manner. He was under a death sentence when I met him, and had a positive, even humane attitude. I began to look at the flip side of my original question: how can an individual or family resist when the state wields against them its technical forces and its psychological suggestions of hate?

Hypnotists and the Power of Words

I studied how this young Chilean man immunized himself against the daily denigrations wielded against him by a government. Most fascinating was that his mother, a literate shantytown dweller, studied hypnosis. On family visits, this woman often hypnotized her son and provided suggestions about feeling loved and mentally leaving the harshness of his physical conditions. His wife, son, mother, sister, and brothers drew an emotional net around him, countering the otherwise annihilative suggestions with words imbued with his importance to them, and messages of strength, worth and dignity.

I had set out to study how social forces can break down, degrade and destabilize citizens and ended up intrigued with the power of a cooperative family to break the spell of the injunctions of a totalitarian state.

It is important to mention that hypnotists may especially well grasp the extent to which hateful, even indifferent suggestions, words, metaphors and symbols are integrated into any planned violation. Physical abuse often is only the tip of the iceberg.

When brutality is carried out with indifference, as when the torturer applying electric shock to a person's genitals

takes a break to chat with his wife over the telephone about dinner, the unconscious mind of the harmed person receives a profound and lasting indirect suggestion that his/her suffering, much less the heroics and good luck of enduring, is trivial.

State Suggestive Forces

Especially from my years of study in Chile, but also in South Africa (from 1986-1990), I learned that when social control and *not* government accountability is the name of the game, the state must work on the unconscious minds of its citizens to occupy their daily reveries and narrow their range of mental states. Fear, terror and hate are necessary mental states for various sectors of the population and become primary political goals. The police-controlled media are employed to send the needed direct and subliminal messages, as are the military-run universities, hospitals and so on. Loyalty to the state must replace love even of family, as well as fear, curiosity, terror, and ambition.

Is There an Applicability of All This to the United States?

I think *Hope Under Siege* applies to life here in two ways. First, considering the rise of hate movements, and the neglect of public health and education, the cornerstone of an effective democracy, we in North America need to think broadly about hypnosis, learning its macro- as well as its micro-dynamics. Any society sends messages to its citizens about how to act, and even how to feel. Torture chambers are only the extreme end of the line in government controls. Hate, suggested directly or indirectly by officials, will produce psychophysiological responses in most people and may lead to seemingly automatic behavioral responses, from cross-burnings to reactions of hurt and outrage.

Second, the social context in which hypnotherapy occurs charges the hypnotist client relationship. Ericksonian hypnotherapy could not be used by a torturer or anyone else in a totalitarian regime because from start to finish it is designed to empower the subject, not the hypnotist.

I remember Jay Haley used to say it was a good thing Milton Erickson was not a despot because of the tremendous charisma of his (fortunately) benevolent personality. Ericksonian therapy is rooted in a democratic philosophy based on assumptions of equality, justice and mutual respect. In Chile under Pinochet, victims of state-hypnosis were not open to hypnosis in subsequent therapy. The

process of induction itself became as toxic to them as electric wires may be to those who were electrically tortured.

When I went to Denmark to meet the director of the first international torture treatment center, Dr. Inge Kemp Genefke, I was told that she did not want to meet me because she was told I had come to discuss the applicability of hypnosis to torture treatment. She said hypnosis was what torturers did, and therapy was the opposite of that: empowerment of the subject. I told her I was part of a new hypnosis movement that shared her same aspirations. We began our dialogue from there.

I would like to see national and international movements that preserve human dignity, fostering not only economic change but also imparting suggestions of sharing, caring, working together, universalism, laden with respect for cultural and religious differences. Imagine real social programs provided hand in hand with some suggestions other than "Hate while you Wait." How about "To Live is to Give!"

Social suggestions, like those in individual hypnosis, can be used or abused. They are tools we have, and they are here to stay. How, when and why they are used need to become subjects of concern for humanity to prevent government abuse in the coming decades.

* * *

References

- (1) Ritterman, M. (1983). *Using Hypnosis in Family Therapy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- (2) Ritterman, M. (1991). *Hope Under Siege: Terror and Family Support in Chile*. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Co.
- (3) Ritterman, M. (1985). "Symptoms, Social Justice and Personal Freedom." *Journal of Strategic and Systemic Therapies*, 4, pp. 48-63.
- (4) Ritterman, M. (1987, January-February). "Torture: The Counter Therapy of the State." *Family Therapy Networker*, pp. 43-47.

* * *

Michele Ritterman, Ph.D., is a presenter at the Fifth International Congress in Phoenix in December. Hers is a uniquely broad social and intercultural perspective. Her books *Hope Under Siege*, and *Using Hypnosis in Family Therapy* are available from RITTERMAN 3908 WAKESTOWN AVE., DAK. CA 94610 510-763-7309.