Views on Ericksonian Brief Therapy, Process and Action

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Milton H. Erickson’s Increasing Shift to Less Directive Hypnotic Techniques as Illustrated by Work with Family Members

Betty Alice Erickson-Elliott, M.S., and Roxanna Erickson Klein, R.N., M.S.

Milton H. Erickson, M.D., shifted from a directive framework of hypnotic work to a more permissive and nondirective approach as his usual method. These experiential anecdotes from the family members who worked with him throughout his entire professional career help trace that progression.

Milton H. Erickson, M.D., was interested in hypnosis his entire adult life. While still an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin, he practiced with his siblings to improve his abilities to induce trance and elicit hypnotic phenomena. Family members continued to serve as hypnotic subjects throughout Erickson’s career. Some of these people expressed a strong interest in learning about hypnosis and served as his subjects over long periods of time. They included his sister, Bertha, and her daughter, Deedee, his wife, Elizabeth, two of their daughters, Betty Alice and Roxanna, and

Authors’ Note: Herbert S. Lustig, M.D., was of invaluable assistance in the preparation of this paper. We owe him a debt of gratitude for that and for his friendship over the years.

The reader may notice the lack of footnotes or references from the literature supporting statements about Erickson’s beliefs, motives, and behaviors. The authors are two of Erickson’s daughters. Their daily family life was replete with informal
one of their daughters-in-law, Lillian. Collectively, these women worked with Erickson as subjects throughout his entire clinical career. As such, they are rich sources for an overview of the evolution of Erickson’s work with the trance state.

Erickson was taught the directive and authoritarian approach to hypnosis. At the time of his education, that was the accepted method of trance induction—the subjects were directed to behave in certain ways. Over the years, Erickson shifted from that approach, as his usual method, to a more permissive and open framework of trance induction and utilization. A number of reasons have been offered by various people to explain this shift. The authors believe that Erickson learned that a cooperative framework and giving the subject full control of his or her trance,

demonstrations and manifestations of Erickson’s philosophical framework and of his understandings of hypnosis. They have a combined total of over 45 years of working clinically with Erickson, his patients, and his students as well as life-long interactions with him as their father, teacher, and confidant. Additionally, this paper was critically reviewed by Elizabeth Moore Erickson, Erickson’s wife for over 40 years and the person closest to him both personally and professionally. The authors are confident that their comments and statements not only accurately reflect many of Erickson’s beliefs but that they are presented in a way which Erickson would agree.

The vignettes and experiential anecdotes presented are written in the third person for clarity. Special thanks go to each contributor: Bertha Gallun, Deedee Steinfuhr, Lillian Erickson, and Elizabeth Moore Erickson. Readers should be assured that each of these maintained complete editorial control over her contribution. Typically, each was adamant over specific word choices to insure that her precise and exact memory was conveyed.

Readers should also be aware that each of these subjects was a volunteer. Each was fully aware her participation as a subject was an educational experience for both Erickson and herself. Erickson not only was always available to discuss learnings but he deliberately and carefully helped each learn more about her own capabilities and abilities. None of the subjects felt as though she was participating in or even demonstrating therapy. They each felt as though the experiences were opportunities to learn more about hypnosis and, in the process, help others learn about it.

The authors believe that over the years, Erickson developed an increasing respect for the individuality of each person. We believe that he came to view hypnosis and trance as cooperative experiences. Each person uses self-knowledge and abilities in an individualistic and highly personalized way. These selected anecdotes illustrate Erickson’s growing understanding of the importance of fully respecting each person’s individuality.

It is impossible to write about family members without bias. The authors make no apologies for their feelings of love for their father and their respect and admiration for him as a man, a psychiatrist, and a clinician.

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within the parameters of the purposes of the trance, was far more effective than was a rigid and authoritarian approach.

The use of family as subjects had benefits for Erickson as well as for the family members. Each subject realizes she learned a great deal; all are expert at using hypnosis for a multiplicity of purposes. Erickson’s relationship with the subjects enabled them to be totally honest with him in their reactions and responses, and also enabled him to follow the effects of their cooperative hypnotic work over long periods of time.

Erickson emphasized that development of rapport and trust was vital. He believed that hypnosis was a unique state of consciousness which enabled the accessing of inner resources. Understandings were more literal and concrete in a trance, and he cautioned students that the subject’s thinking processes were far more childlike and direct in a trance.

Because usual emotional protections can be circumvented in a trance, a subject’s sense of security and trust is more fragile than in the ordinary waking state. The mind in the literal hypnotic state is far more protective of the subject’s vulnerability than it is in the more logical waking state. Erickson believed and stated repeatedly that understandings within the hypnotic trance may often be quite different from those obtained outside of trance, even when the same information was available in both states. Therefore, miscommunications, misunderstandings, and mistakes were not understood with the usual thinking processes.

Initially, Erickson and his subjects worked within a passive and tacit understanding of security and safety. Later, he worked more actively and explicitly in cultivating that sense of security and trust that he believed a subject needed during a trance state.

Erickson emphasized that there must be a basic respect for the individuality of each person. He also taught that each person accomplished goals in his or her own way and that no theory of psychotherapy could properly consider the totality of each individual’s uniqueness. It was the therapist’s task to tailor therapy to the individual. Likewise, suggestions within the hypnotic state must be tailored to the subject’s own personality and perceptions of the world. An open framework of hypnosis with a number of suggestions offered to the client is far more likely to contain acceptable and productive ideas than are suggestions given in a direct, limited, and thereby limiting fashion.

The following anecdotes reflect Erickson’s growing awareness that subjects must feel safe, secure, and confident that they will be protected and respected. They also are an indication that understandings can be vastly different on different levels of awareness and that the therapist must take into account. They further suggest that it is unexpectedly difficult to
construct tightly knit hypnotic interventions that encompass all of the subject's inner world.

In one of her earliest experiences with Erickson and hypnosis, Bertha recalled watching Erickson work with their brother in the 1920s. Clarence went into a trance and relived a morning's activities. He was responsible for the morning milk route, which was part of the daily routine on the family farm. One morning Clarence had taken much longer than usual and had no recollection of any unusual delays. While in a trance, Clarence remembered each stop on the route that morning and recalled the conversations with the farmers. He then told about stopping and watching geese cross the road and vanish into the field on the other side.

Bertha reported that Erickson went over the route again with their brother after he had been aroused from the trance. While Clarence could recall the routine stops he had made and even some of the conversations, he had no conscious memory of stopping to watch the geese. Erickson then asked if he had not made another stop and seen something unusual crossing the road. At that point, Clarence instantly remembered the innocent activity he had previously dismissed from his mind.

Bertha's clear recollection of Clarence's astonishment at the retrieval of a "forgotten" memory remained vivid for the rest of her life. More than 50 years later, she was able to recall it in detail. A short time after she had watched Clarence remembering the geese crossing the road, Bertha practiced hypnotic regression with Erickson and awoke in a distressed state. She had been involved in a bit of childish misbehavior that she wished to conceal. Bertha did not remember Erickson prying or intruding on her privacy while she was in the trance nor did she believe he was interested in discovering it. She also knew that she had not inadvertently exposed the information during the trance. But when she roused herself she was upset and uncomfortable. She remembered Erickson trying to soothe her and saying, "That's all right, Bertha. We're both learning."

It would seem that Bertha had been so impressed at the ability of hypnosis to jog her brother's memory that she became unsure as to her own abilities to "protect" herself. Years later, when she worked with Erickson in more formal settings, she was willing to demonstrate various phenomena with him, but she never initiated participation as a subject. She also felt she never went as deeply into a trance with him as she could have and always had the sense of being "on guard" while serving as a subject. She usually disassociated and saw herself monitoring her responses from behind her chair.

Erickson respected his sister's verbalized reluctance to go into a deep trance. Bertha recalled, however, that he told her many times over the
ensuing years that she was smart enough to use autohypnosis for whatever purpose she wanted. Eventually she did use autohypnosis for pain control during recovery from major surgery.

Erickson also worked with Betty Alice in teaching situations. When Betty Alice was seven years old, she had been bitten by a wild squirrel. At that time she denied catching the squirrel and claimed the severe injury, which required an operation and months of physical therapy, had been caused by falling on broken glass. This episode was the focus of numerous age regression demonstrations, but Erickson never pressed Betty Alice for details, after she told of reaching for the squirrel, and he never questioned her version.

Later, when she told her father that she had caught the squirrel and it had bitten her, Erickson replied that he already knew. With his skills in observation and trance communication, it is difficult to believe he was not aware of the full circumstances.

This contrasted with his handling of Bertha’s secret, years previously. It appears he may have learned from her reaction that a subject’s doubts about the protection of inner confidences can undermine the building and maintenance of trust and security. Bertha’s feeling of “being on guard” made it more difficult for her to experience some of the benefits gained from her expertise with hypnosis. With Betty Alice, however, Erickson actively respected the boundaries and avoided even the appearance of having knowledge she did not wish him to possess.

Erickson had ample opportunity to learn from these long-term subjects that people react and respond in personalized ways. By the late 1930s, Erickson had used his wife, Elizabeth, as a demonstration subject many times. Once Erickson asked her to demonstrate amnesia for an easily remembered piece of information. Elizabeth understood from the context of the request that an element of the demonstration was to produce physical manifestations of anxiety.

She felt that a reaction of anxiety was not compatible with her personality and that it was particularly incongruent in that demonstration setting. Therefore, she did not want to comply, although she felt some internal pressure to do so. The audience was waiting, Erickson was her husband, and they had established a good working relationship in many previous demonstrations of various hypnotic phenomenon.

Elizabeth responded by producing an auditory hallucination of a humorous radio program that was popular at the time. This program incorporated the suggested amnesia as part of its continuing story line. Thoughts of the forgetful character on the radio show produced giggles rather than anxiety. Later, Elizabeth explained to Erickson what had occurred. Because
the amnesia was part of a humorous radio program, she said, she “couldn’t help” being amused rather than anxious or distressed.

The amnesia Erickson suggested was experienced by Elizabeth but she produced it in a form more acceptable to her personality. She complied with his suggestion but still was able to react in a more comfortable way.

A somewhat similar situation of the subject responding in a completely unanticipated way occurred with his daughter-in-law, Lillian, in the late 1950s. Erickson had been working with a patient who had hysterical paralysis of the legs. He asked Lillian if she would demonstrate that type of paralysis for a group of physicians and she agreed.

After she developed the paralysis, Lillian became quite uncomfortable with the multitude of sensations it created and told Erickson that she didn’t think she could move. Erickson reemphasized to her that the paralysis had been artificially created by the trance and assured her that she could move. She was not reassured. While she remained in a trance, Erickson explained to her that he had wanted her to demonstrate this type of paralysis to the physicians in order to show them that it could be experienced very realistically. She had demonstrated that extremely well, he continued. Lillian remained unconvinced. She explained that she didn’t think she could walk and therefore she didn’t want to try.

Erickson understood that in the trance state, Lillian was responding very literally to the suggestions of paralysis. Her presumed inability to walk was frightening and overwhelming to her. Therefore, she was reluctant to try to move.

Erickson reminded her that nothing had been said about her ability to dance. He knew she loved to dance and that dancing was a rare treat for her. He also pointed out that when she danced, she merely followed the lead of her partner and that this was different than initiating movement on her own. Lillian agreed with Erickson’s description. One of the observing physicians then danced her around the room to the applause of the rest of the group. Lillian emerged from her trance, laughing and breathless from her dancing and, of course, fully able to move and walk.

In remembering this episode, Lillian stated that Erickson had asked her to do a demonstration and that she had wanted to do it. The feelings and sensations that were created within her had unexpectedly overwhelmed her. She was astonished at the “realness” of the paralysis and uncertain and unsure of what was going to happen next. Erickson then “fixed” it for her.

Elizabeth and Lillian both responded to Erickson’s suggestions in unexpected ways. Both were perfectly willing demonstration subjects and both had agreed to demonstrate the suggested phenomena. However, neither of them felt wholly comfortable with the suggested phenomena in the way
that it was presented to them. Elizabeth deliberately engineered a more satisfactory situation, and Erickson was left to explain to the audience why she was giggling. Lillian’s reaction was unexpected even to her, and it then became incumbent upon Erickson to reestablish her feelings of trust, safety, and security. Both times the issue was resolved satisfactorily, and both subjects remember the episodes with great pleasure.

Erickson believed strongly in reciprocal arrangements. He made it clear that he wanted each of the people who worked with him to gain as much as possible from their experiences with him. Erickson believed that pain management and control was one of the most useful learnings to be gained from hypnosis. Even though he worked only with Betty Alice and Roxanna in formal settings, his children are able to use self-hypnosis for pain management. All the subjects mentioned in this paper are skilled in using self-hypnosis for this purpose.

Erickson had learned that subjects understand and interpret in their own ways. Even when explanations had been carefully presented and permission freely given in both a waking and a trance state, instructions could be misunderstood. This could cause unexpected and undesired ramifications.

Deedee remembers a demonstration to a group in the late 1950s where she and Betty Alice agreed to demonstrate anesthesia of the lower body. One of the purposes of the demonstration was to show the audience that an emotionally healthy subject would be self-protective during trance. After the trance had been produced and anesthesia developed, he asked both young women to stand. Both refused and Erickson pointed out to the audience that both subjects were maintaining protective mechanisms even in a deep trance.

When Erickson asked them to come out of their trances, Deedee took a very long time. She never had taken such a long time before and never has taken that long since that time. Later, she said she had been hallucinating a beautiful green line in the carpet in front of her and did not want to stop looking at it. Although that hallucination was occurred more than 30 years ago, Deedee still remembers the beautiful green color. No visual hallucination since has been as absorbing, vivid, or beautiful to her.

Betty Alice came out of her trance easily. Later, in a conversation with Deedee, she expressed dismay over what she perceived as conflicting suggestions of anesthesia and standing. She then developed amnesia, which still persists, for that one session, although she can easily remember the other demonstrations in which she and Deedee participated at that same meeting.

After that time, Betty Alice resisted demonstrating anesthesia, even though she continued to enjoy demonstrating other hypnotic phenomena. On a number of occasions, Erickson attempted unsuccessfully to elicit her cooperation, but she continued to resist.
Betty Alice’s reluctance to consider demonstrating anesthesia was unusual, obvious, and of concern to Erickson. Finally he became adamant that she acknowledge her ability to develop anesthesia and told her just that. Betty Alice still remembers Erickson convincing her that while she probably would never have to use hypnotically induced anesthesia, it was a useful skill for her to possess. He worked with her privately, using a needle on the back of her hand as a source of pain, and she again became aware she could develop good anesthesia. However, she continued to be reluctant to develop anesthesia as a demonstration subject, and Erickson never again asked her to do so.

Erickson began working with Roxanna in the late 1960s. By this time, he had refined his techniques a great deal and approached his work with her in a carefully planned and sequential fashion. This involved extensive preparation by Roxanna and her full readiness on both conscious and unconscious levels. Trances were usually initiated by her. She always felt she had total freedom to refuse any hypnotic suggestion without offering explanations. On one occasion, for example, a group of students asked her to demonstrate automatic writing. Erickson directed the question to Roxanna, who was in a deep trance. She refused, without giving a reason, and was fully comfortable and confident that Erickson would protect her from any audience disappointment. Erickson never questioned Roxanna about that refusal, and he never requested that particular activity from her in any future session.

After each trance with Roxanna, Erickson talked to her about what she had learned and whether she realized that what she was learning was valuable. While he said she was learning a great deal, he also indicated that there was much more left to acquire. He implied she was not yet ready to learn. However, there was no doubt that one day she would be ready. He also let her know that he was confident that she would learn quickly, efficiently, and effectively.

Erickson had varied his methods of trance induction over the years. Bertha remembered him using a pendulum. With Elizabeth in the 1930s and 1940s, he primarily used suggestions of relaxation. In the 1950s, with Betty Alice, Erickson focused on the hand levitation method of induction. He continued to use that almost exclusively with her in the 1960s and 1970s. With Roxanna, Erickson used a wider variety of methods. He reintroduced the pendulum and occasionally used other mechanical devices, including a holographic picture of meshing gears. The induction Roxanna most preferred, however, and the one Erickson used most often with her, was the confusion technique.

Erickson continued to work with Roxanna while she developed expertise in demonstrating various trance phenomena. He waited for an appropriate opportunity to begin to teach her the important skill of pain...
management. One day, when she was about 15 years old, she returned from an outing with a severe burn on her leg. She had received it while riding on a motorcycle and knew that her parents strongly disapproved of that activity.

When she reluctantly told her parents about the injury, Erickson leaned toward her and looked intently into her eyes. He asked in slow measured tones and with an obviously pleased air of expectation, “Were you able to use hypnosis to control the pain?” Roxanna was so amazed at this unexpected response, which completely ignored the transgression of motorcycle riding, that she immediately slipped into a profound trance.

Roxanna had been thoughtfully prepared by Erickson to learn more about hypnosis. He had carefully positioned the prize of “learning more when you are ready” as a means of helping her prepare to learn the important goal of pain management. Erickson’s response to Roxanna, focusing on that use of hypnosis and ignoring the motorcycle ride, confused her and capitalized on her familiarity with the confusion induction technique. It produced hypnosis for her in an easy and customary way.

After that time, Roxanna committed herself fully to learning all she could about the use of hypnosis for pain management. Her experiences with hypnosis became directed toward pain control applications. Time distortion, disassociation, auditory and visual hallucinations, sensory modifications, and age regression all could be applied to pain management. She remained uninterested in learning automatic writing because she could see no useful applications of that to anesthesia. Her interest in hypnosis as a tool continues to be focused primarily in pain management areas.

Erickson always chose the method best suited to the situation and could be highly directive, even in his later years. There can be little doubt, however, that he gradually shifted from the authoritarian ways common early in his career to the more indirect and cooperative methods for which he became so noted. There have been any number of explanations given for this move. The authors believe that these anecdotes illustrate a pattern of Erickson’s growth in understanding the importance of a cooperative trance experience instead of a more closed and rigid framework.

There were innumerable mutual benefits obtained from Erickson interacting with family members in a cooperative teaching framework over such long periods of time. All of the subjects realize they learned a great deal and have benefitted enormously and in countless ways from this knowledge. Erickson was able to follow the long-term effects of early hypnotic suggestions and trance work and then to use that information to devise more effective ways of working with people.

There is little doubt that the subjects’ closeness to Erickson enhanced
their reactions to hypnosis and to his suggestions. On the other hand, the subjects were far more critical of Erickson’s style and wording and to the whole trance situation than they were when they were working with other hypnotists. This also helped Erickson recognize ways in which he might refine and improve his techniques.

Bertha’s reluctance to trust herself fully in a hypnotic trance lasted her entire life, even though she knew rationally that her fear was unfounded and a handicap to her full use of hypnosis. This was a clear lesson for Erickson that he must demonstrate overtly and positively that he would be protective; it was not enough to rely on unspoken understandings.

He did that with Betty Alice when she wanted to conceal that she had been bitten by a wild squirrel. He allowed her the opportunity to examine the episode in numerous age regression experiences. However, he not only avoided questioning her, he also allowed her to maintain the belief that he had accepted her version. She responded to this by trusting him fully and by being willing to work with him as a demonstration and teaching subject extensively and over a long period of time.

Both Elizabeth and Lillian responded to Erickson’s direct suggestions in unanticipated ways. Although Elizabeth altered the framework so that she could react in a way that was agreeable to her, Erickson had to exercise considerable creative skills so that Lillian would emerge from the trance feeling good about the experience. The clear explanation for the conflicting suggestions of lower body anesthesia and standing given to Deedee and Betty Alice before and during their trance was insufficient in the literal trance state to satisfy them on all levels. Deedee refused to come out of the trance and ignored Erickson while she enjoyed a pleasant and intriguing visual hallucination. Betty Alice was unable to reconcile the perceived dilemma with her previous experiences with her father, so she eliminated all memories of it and became reluctant to enter into that particular and limited hypnotic situation again.

These few incidents alone could have emphasized to Erickson that the subject’s full understanding and acceptance of each hypnotic suggestion was vital. In a directive and authoritarian framework, there is no possible way for the hypnotist to anticipate all responses of the subject. As well as Erickson knew his wife, his sister, his niece, his daughter-in-law, and his daughters, he could not have predicted their responses to some of his direct suggestions.

When he began working with Roxanna, Erickson first directed information not only to her rational and logical modes of thinking but to her more illogical and emotional modes of understanding. While he engaged in the process of preparing her conscious mind, he relied on her unconscious to prepare her by emphasizing that “there was more to learn when she was
ready,” without explaining how she would know when she was ready. He then focused her on what he considered the most important use of hypnosis, pain management, without addressing it directly. Not only did the locus of control remain in her, but there could be no unexpected responses because there was no direct suggestion to her about this.

Erickson’s special relationships and repeated interactions with the same subjects over such long periods of time facilitated his deeper understanding of hypnotherapy. His apparent willingness to change his methods in view of such new understandings enabled him to refine his techniques. He was able to appreciate the full subtleties of the hypnotic relationship, in part, because of this work.