CURRENT THINKING AND RESEARCH IN BRIEF THERAPY

Solutions, Strategies, Narratives

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Erickson: A Framework of Therapy and Living

Elizabeth Erickson, Betty Alice Erickson, and Roxanna Erickson Klein

Milton Erickson built a bridge between the psychotherapy of his time and his own methods and conceptualizations. He is widely credited with providing the foundations of modern brief, strategic, hypnotic, cognitive, family, solution-focused, and story-telling therapies and of other interactional methods. Although he wrote scientific articles prolifically, none of his own work directly addressed his underlying framework. Professionally, Erickson was adamantly

Authors’ Note: This account is built on our collective understanding of Erickson’s work. Consequently, it will include some of what others see or remember and some material unique to the authors, who are his wife and two of his daughters. Each of us had the opportunity to know and relate to him as a professional adult. We found his wisdom and guidance to be central to our lives.
atheoretical; he believed theories were too restrictive for the infinite variety and variations of human life and thought. People's uniqueness necessitated constant creativity in therapy and interventions.

It has been speculated that Erickson's own struggles with physical handicaps contributed to his exceptional ability to understand human nature. Afflicted with poliomyelitis at 17, he had to relearn how to walk. This personal experience gave him insight into the struggles that everyone has in overcoming individual trauma and limitations. His visible triumph provided an additional dimension to nonverbal role modeling, which he developed as a therapeutic tool. As he matured both professionally and personally, he continued to develop his understanding of the resilience of the human spirit and of people's drive for overall health and well-being within society.

He came to be recognized in the areas of psychiatry and hypnosis, and opportunities arose for him to meet and consult with individuals who had excelled in other professions. Erickson first met Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead in October 1940, when he was contacted for comments about their studies of trance states in Balinese dancing.

Mead and Erickson also worked together for the government during World War II. The project involved consulting with many others, including Ruth Benedict, another anthropologist and well-known author. Part of their work involved a study of the characteristics of Japanese society and their impact on personality development. This work was basic in changing the perceptions of the general American public about the strength and fortitude of the Japanese character. As the work evolved, it also dealt with the psychological endurance of prisoners of war. Much of the information generated by these projects is still classified.

Aldous Huxley, because of his growing interest in hypnosis, met Erickson in 1949. They then worked together over a period of years, exploring the depths and variations of hypnosis. This collaboration contributed to some of Huxley's works, including Island and Doors of Perception. Although Huxley did not consider the latter to be one of his major works, it is one of his most familiar books. Huxley also lectured at some of the professional hypnosis meetings and provided a prime example of how a professional outside of the medical field can add unique and valuable insights into the phenomena of hypnosis.
Huxley, Mead, and Erickson continued to maintain their friendship as well as their professional relationship with each other throughout their lives. One aspect of their strong friendship was the lengthy and respectful debates they had. For example, Mead was a staunch believer in the power of nurturing; Erickson ascribed great validity to the power of nature in the still unresolved controversy over the relative importance of nature versus nurture. The inspiration that resulted from associating with brilliant thinkers in other fields added significantly to the broadness of Erickson’s vision.

An important aspect of Erickson’s friendships was the inclusion of people in his family life. This was facilitated by his office’s being physically located in his homes; this pattern continued with students in later years. Each colleague, student, patient, and family member could learn from the others. Personal and professional friendships could develop on deep levels and even overlap. In today’s more stringent professional atmosphere, this aspect of personal, social, and professional overlap is lost.

During World War II, Erickson did thousands of psychological evaluations for the Selective Service. This extensive exposure, even though it was limited primarily to physically healthy young adults, gave him a wide perspective of individual and normal variations of human behavior. He credited it with providing him with a wealth of knowledge and an appreciation for the vast variety of productive living styles. It also provided recognition that meaningful and significant interactions can occur in a brief time and with limited contact.

From the 1930s through the 1940s, Erickson worked primarily at mental institutions. There were few psychotropic medications at that time, so mental institutions played a much larger role in society and in the treatment of both mild and severe mental disorders. Erickson refined his screening and treatment methods by working with this population. In 1950, he shifted his interest to private practice, combining it with teaching professional people in the mental and physical health fields.

Erickson was committed to revitalizing hypnosis as a respected and legitimate tool for professionals and, to a large degree, he accomplished this personal goal. In 1957, he and a few colleagues founded the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis, and Erickson
became the first president. The ASCH replaced and was a formalization of the training that had been done under the title Seminars on Hypnosis. A large share of the profits from the Seminars was donated to the fledgling organization. Erickson also became the founding editor of the *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis*, a post he kept for a decade.

Erickson was also dedicated to the principle that knowledge should be shared. That theme pervaded his personal and professional life. One of the values he instilled in his family, and one that was learned by many of his students, was that productive work is self-rewarding. It has been remarked upon that all Ericksonians know how to integrate work and play and how to derive recreation and joy from work. Erickson himself never retired; at the time of his death, his calendar was booked for over a year in advance. In his last decade, when age and physical weakness compromised his ability to work long hours, he taught small groups in his home.

The influence Erickson had through his love of knowledge and the sharing of that knowledge is evident today in the number of professionals—including artists, both painters and sculptors, musicians, and law enforcement officials—who credit him with the inspiration to carry their own work further. Similarly, in the ASCH a number of people who worked with Erickson made substantial contributions to the furtherance of the organization and hypnosis in general and to the recognition of Erickson’s work in particular. Kay Thompson and Robert Pearson, both of whom served as presidents of ASCH, deserve special tribute for this.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, individuals including Jay Haley and Ernest Rossi contributed greatly to the preservation of Erickson’s primary writings. They also worked with him on the completion of papers that were in draft form. Later, they went on to develop their own ideas and directions. Jeffrey Zeig is another long-term student whose contributions have been substantial and vital to the Erickson legacy. In the final year of Erickson’s life, Zeig worked with him to create the Milton H. Erickson Foundation. Zeig remains the director of what is now an internationally known hub of professional information and teaching.

The growth and development of the Ericksonian movement pleased Erickson. However, he never wavered from his staunch conviction
that every professional must discover and refine methodologies that are individually appropriate. The tendency of some toward blind adherence to a particular school, Ericksonian included, was a constant irritation to him. People who studied directly with him can recall his reiterating that each was responsible for developing an individual pathway. Perhaps these paths would be based on his work and on what had been learned from him, but each student had the capacity, capability, and responsibility to advance in an individualistic manner. It was counter to his way of thinking that his way be regarded as the one right way.

**PREMISES**

Even though he did not advocate theories of human personality or for psychological work, Erickson had a number of premises and techniques upon which his frameworks of both therapy and living were built.

He adhered to the concept that there is a biochemical basis for some mental illnesses as well as for personality and behavior. Most of his life as a practicing psychiatrist was lived well before the proliferation of psychotropic medications; the drugs and medical techniques of the day were not as effective as are the psychopharmacological agents of today. Erickson never ceased learning, so it is reasonable to assume that had medical science been as advanced as it is now, administration of drugs would have been a more important part of his professional repertoire.

Erickson believed in a benevolent unconscious, which was a radical departure from the world of Freudian psychotherapy in which he, and most other therapists of that time, were trained. Even today, this perspective differs from other schools of therapy. Erickson's concept of a benevolent unconscious underscores how life experiences are incorporated within one's being and can be used as resources. He also considered the unconscious to be benign, playing roles of protector and helper. Because the unconscious operates in concrete and childlike ways, sometimes the methods it chooses are not the most productive for adult and sophisticated lives. Much of his therapy is based upon the development of internal life, helping
overcome inflexibilities and access dormant resources. Appreciating the role of the unconscious and utilizing its resources are central in this philosophy.

Erickson believed the unconscious mind was sensitive to precision in communication and that nonverbal signals were part of the complex of communication. Exquisite care in word choice and thoughtful arrangement of words, as well as choice of tone, emphasis, rhythm, and attention to the multiple meanings of words are essential. The nonverbal elements of posture, expression, gesture, and even respiratory pattern are part of the therapeutic message. Much of the power of therapy rests on attentiveness to total communication.

Everyone’s past, Erickson believed, contains resources, and he was adept at using these resources as building blocks for the future. The past is unchangeable even though perceptions of it are highly mutable. Focusing on the future, using resources built over a lifetime, and implementing changed perceptions of the past gives patients the ability to manage their lives in productive ways.

Insight into issues was not seen as a requirement for emotional growth, maturity, and problem resolution. Insight is relevant only in certain situations, depending on the individual’s life circumstances and manner of thinking. Productive change, with or without insight, was a major focus of Erickson’s approach to therapy as well as to life.

Therapeutic interventions themselves could be brief. Erickson had enormous faith in the abilities of people to solve their own problems. One major role for the therapist is expediting access to unconscious resources. This does not necessarily mean that therapy itself is brief. In fact, good therapy continues long after the intervention has been consciously forgotten. Erickson would often structure a brief contact so that it would stimulate ongoing development, and the original intervention would become intertwined with growth. The following three examples help to illustrate parts of this premise.

A patient once saw Erickson while in crisis about the diagnosis and stated limitations for her mentally and physically handicapped daughter. Erickson redefined the mother’s fears into flexible and powerful coping mechanisms during their one session. He never saw this patient again. Yet years later, after Erickson’s death, the mother was moved to contact Erickson’s family to express the significance
of what had been, for her and her daughter, a life-changing session. Her daughter's life had developed in a way that would have been impossible, she said, without Erickson's wisdom and words.

A technique Erickson used with many patients was to see them at variably timed intervals. After several appointments, patients would leave therapy and incorporate the work that had been done into their daily lives. After reaching new levels of growth and actualization, many would return for additional sessions. Some returned seasonally, others had intervals of years or decades between sessions. The new work would begin by incorporating the therapy that had been previously done and the positive growth that had occurred subsequently. These intermittent visits often continued indefinitely and were encouraged by Erickson, who treated returning patients almost as old friends. Further, it allowed him to see if the therapy he had structured was progressing well and gave him the opportunity to learn from patients which techniques had been most useful. The actual return for further work was valuable to the patients; so was the knowledge that Erickson was an always present resource, and that enabled them to extend their own abilities.

A third manner in which long-lasting influence was expressed was in work with colleagues who consulted with Erickson for intellectual and professional development. They often discovered Erickson's influence was relevant to many levels of their lives. To this day, when students study Erickson's original works, they often incorporate personal growth into the process.

Erickson understood the complete context of the patient's environment was of great importance. Adaptive responses and outcomes were always measured in terms of the person's life within the context of his or her social and physical communities. Developmental and systemic frameworks are elemental components of an individual's world and resource base. Erickson knew systems could be altered by a change in one small part; he often did family therapy with only one member of the family present in the office.

The diagnostic process, for Erickson, had less to do with identifying specific categories than it did with understanding an individual's ability to "get along in the world." While recognizing that major mental illnesses exist, Erickson focused on outcomes and the ability of the patient to become an interactive and participatory member
of society. Finding pleasure and satisfaction in one’s life, no matter what the circumstances, is an essential element of well-being. Hard work as well as adapting to personal limitations and finding joy in the small elements of life are aspects of mental health.

Erickson was fully aware that there were acute and chronic pathologies. As an intern, he worked in the Colorado prison system and continued to work as an advisor for law enforcement and parole boards until late in his life. From his work with offenders, he knew that some people, for a variety of reasons, simply couldn’t be helped. Occasionally, critics have raised questions about Erickson’s high success rate. Erickson never even attempted to conceal that, occasionally, his therapy didn’t “work.” He even wrote a paper about “effective hypnotherapy that failed.” He recognized there are some people who are unmotivated or otherwise unavailable for positive change.

TECHNIQUES

Erickson developed a repertoire of therapeutic techniques that were tailored to the individual and were modified by the ongoing interactions with and responses of the patient.

Erickson stimulated change from within the individual by mobilizing unconscious resources that created building blocks upon which further change rested. Conscious awareness does not have to be an integral part of mobilizing resources. Sometimes Erickson deliberately gave the individual awareness of some of the tools involved; at other times, there was no discussion on a conscious level. The internal locus of change that Erickson fostered gave patients power over their lives and ensured that change would continue beyond therapeutic sessions. Often, individuals did not realize that Erickson had been instrumental in producing these changes and perceived the changes as being self-generated or thought they “just happened.”

Hypnosis provides a valuable tool for communication with the unconscious, and Erickson used both formal and conversational, or naturalistic, trances. His commitment to hypnosis was based on his understanding of the unconscious mind and of human nature.

Erickson is recognized as the master of indirect suggestion. It is
mistakenly thought that most of his therapy was done indirectly. In working with patients, he often was quite direct. His suggestions usually included a vast array of both direct and indirect suggestions. He also developed a repertoire of approaches now known as paradoxical interventions. These integrate the “symptom” as a part of the “solution.”

Erickson did not deal overtly with victimization. He trusted that the unconscious would heal wounds from the past as the future became the focus and direction of the patient’s life. The basic ideology involves quickly refocusing the patient on the future, giving that person positive alternatives, options, and ideas that could evolve into a constructive future path. Erickson also presented unspoken but clear confidence in the person’s ability to use the elicited options and ideas to create satisfactory outcomes.

Erickson was able to use whatever the patient presented in ways that were productive. An example of this method of utilization was his work with his elementary-school-age daughter who had failed a prerequisite screening for a Spanish class. That failure was not even addressed, much to the child’s surprise. Instead, the focus was on ways of achieving her goal of learning Spanish. The option, which appealed to her, was to join schoolmates working in the school cafeteria. Not only did she receive a monetary reward, but also, immersion in Spanish became a daily event. Filled with confidence that she would be welcomed into this Spanish-speaking group, she proved herself worthy of their friendship by her eagerness to learn all she could from them. Her failure to pass a test was reframed into an opportunity to learn in a more effective and pleasing way. From both a short-term and a long-term perspective, her goals were met.

“Therapy” continued long after the incident and intervention had passed. Not only did his daughter gain a great deal of confidence in the life-long challenge of joining established groups comfortably, but also, her interest in speaking Spanish has continued.

This illustration is simple; however, the principles involved are applicable to trauma of all sorts. Erickson knew the tools gained from even a minor success were transferable to other situations. Even individuals who have experienced significant and serious trauma can be helped by refocusing on a future filled with alternatives; options and ideas can evolve into a positive future path. Building
on a person’s confidence in conscious and unconscious abilities and recognizing that pain, failure, or trauma can be an opportunity from which to grow and profit can be seen as being simple. Actually, it involves incisive and multilevel elements of therapy.

The preciseness of language as an element of therapy cannot be overemphasized. Some of Erickson’s students and colleagues, including Stephen and Carol Lankton, Ernest Rossi, Jay Haley, Stephen Gilligan, and Jeffrey Zeig, have analyzed his use of language, metaphors, and open-ended suggestions. Using the language of the patient, open-ended metaphors allow each listener to find personal meanings in the stories. Erickson was also adept at creating ambiguous time sequencing, blending past, present, and future tenses and ideas. This results in positive circular thinking, unbounded by linear time. People can therefore continue development at their own personal paces over subsequent years or even decades.

Metaphors and anecdotal storytelling constitute a major tool for therapeutic communication with the unconscious. Often used as a substitute for or in conjunction with trance inductions, Erickson gave complex, multileveled messages in simple terms. This technique was equally effective with groups; Erickson was able to include personalizations that evoked individual responses.

Written overviews of Erickson’s work necessarily deal only with particular facets of his enormously complex and multileveled work. The printed page cannot take into consideration all the varied responses, conditions, and interactive elements. An area often overlooked in an assessment of his work is that he had strong moral convictions which he did not hesitate to make clear to patients, students, and colleagues. He believed there is a right way for people to live and behave, and that was with consideration, kindness, and respect for self and others. He valued the discipline that came from hard work and believed that almost every experience contained seeds of valuable learning.

In this short paper, we have attempted to show how elements of his personal and professional life intertwined with and complemented an orientation toward ongoing growth and learning. Roots of Erickson’s professional work can be seen in his own personal experiences, opportunities, and life path. He modeled the process as he verbally inspired his students to seek and take advantage of the
multiple opportunities presented in daily life. Ericksonian approaches are not merely therapeutic techniques. Ericksonian psychotherapy includes a vital intertwining of personal and professional living and thinking with connections to the past, the present, and the future. His work is now so widely accepted that it is easy to forget how innovative and startling some of his ideas originally were. That alone is an impressive legacy.

A quotation from *My Voice Will Go With You: The Teaching Tales of Milton H. Erickson, M.D.* illustrates how his wisdom and caring continue to influence many of those who come in contact with his work. “And my voice will go with you. And my voice will change into that of your parents, your neighbors, your friends, your schoolmates, your playmates and your teachers. . . .”

**REFERENCE**