Interview with Erika Fromm, Ph.D.

by Roxanna Erickson Klein

Background: Erika Fromm, Ph.D., is a professor emeritus at the University of Chicago. She has been actively involved in advancement of professional hypnosis since 1959, and particularly influential in the areas of research and hypnoanalysis. A Clinical Editor of the International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis, she also is past president of the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis (SCEH), the American Board of Psychological Hypnosis, and the American Psychological Association's Division of Psychological Hypnosis. She has received numerous honors and awards for her work, has authored 97 scientific papers, co-authored or edited six professional books, four of them in the last eight years (three of which have won national awards), and currently is writing another with Michael R. Nash of the University of Tennessee.

Roxanna Klein (REK): You frequently have been identified as the most influential woman in hypnosis. What personal attributes helped you to reach this position of prominence in what had been a male-dominated profession?

Erika Fromm (EF): Devotion to a cause and hard work.

REK: Do you have a brief definition of hypnosis?

EF: Hypnosis is a state of concentration and relaxation, a state in which the subject has little concern for the things in

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the outside world. The general reality orientation fades into the background and the inner subjective reality comes into focus. I strongly feel that hypnosis is an altered state of consciousness in which there is much more imagery, much more suggestibility than in the waking state. There is somewhat more ego receptivity, more contact with the unconscious and more dissociation of the observing ego from the experiencing ego.

I also feel that there are people who have more of a talent to go into a trance than others. The talent for going into trance is on a bimodal distribution curve, there are 2% on the tail that are practically non-hypnotizable, 90% are in a bell-shaped normal distribution, and the remaining 8% peak as highly hypnotizable.

Artists are usually very good hypnotic subjects, but accountants are usually not. People who are rigid are not good subjects. People who are more artistic are usually better. People who enjoy fantasy and fairy tales are good subjects. Children are not so reality conscious.

One time, I went to my pantry to get something, when my daughter was quite young and she suddenly yelled, “Mommy, how could you do that?” When I asked, “Do what?” she answered, “You stepped on Flame’s foot.
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and broke it!" Flame, as it turned out, was a fantasy horse that she had stabed in the pantry, and Flame was as real to her as the pantry was to me. I had to bandage Flame's foot for the next four weeks. Imagination is very real to a child. We do need to educate our children to be reality conscious, but parents who tell their children from the age of two, or so on, that there is no Santa Claus, will produce a child with less imagination and people who are much less able to go into trance.

I don't have much talent to go into trance. Milton Erickson hypnotized me once at a convention. He was talking about a beautiful rug, an Indian rug that was hanging on the wall. It was a blank wall. I could see that rug vividly. He had the whole room hypnotized. It was so beautiful that I can still remember that experience which occurred maybe 30 years ago. I was truly entranced, enthralled. Even now, if I try, I see the imagery. It was the deepest trance experience that I've ever had. I don't know exactly how he did it, but it was beautiful.

REK: Is the true nature of hypnosis still elusive, or has research over the past few decades brought us closer to an understanding of it?

EF: We are closer to a unified theory now, but still don't have one. Hilgard's work, which was based on Janet's earlier work in the 19th century, has brought us closer to understanding the essence of hypnosis. There are four basic theories now: state, trait, dissociation, and social interaction. Daniel Brown and I have discussed them at length in our book Hypnotherapy and Hypnosis (Earleban, 1986).

REK: Is there consensus among researchers about empirical variables that measure hypnotizability?

EF: Yes, individual hypnotizability can be measured. There are some scales that are better than others. The Stanford Hypnotic Susceptibility Scales A, B, & C by Weitzenhoffer and Hilgard are all very good. There are some other scales that are good for individuals who are highly hypnotizable.

REK: In your book Hypnosis: Developments in Research and New Perspectives (2nd ed. coauthored by Ronald Shor, 1979), you discussed some of the divergences of the phenomenological versus behavioral aspects of hypnosis. Since this book was written, has there been more agreement between these two perspectives?

EF: There are still differences. They have to do with the enormous influence of the behaviorists in the United States from about 1926 until about 10 years ago. It was stated, in a somewhat magnified form, "What cannot be observed by an outside objective observer isn't psychology and it doesn't exist." The reports of inner experiences are not objective, and therefore behaviorists do not believe they exist. When someone describes what their inner experiences are, that doesn't count for behaviorists. It has to be observable by an outside observer.

Ronald Shor wrote a chapter in the 1979 edition of our book which states that one should ask subjects what they are feeling inside. That is being done more and more now. We are at the end of behaviorism now. More and more research has turned towards phenomenological aspects now.

REK: In what way would you like to see a bridging of the differences between these two groups?

EF: No bridging of the differences between behaviorism and phenomenology is possible. These are two diametrically opposed ways of looking at psychological data. I am a phenomenologist and I would like to see the behaviorists vanish into the woods. If a subject describes what is going on inside, movement is occurring. That is of more importance to me than whether or not I can see an arm moving.

REK: Your work which was presented in Self Hypnosis: The Chicago Paradigm (Fromm, E. & Kahn, S., The Guilford Press, 1990) seems to bridge qualitative and quantitative research. Is that work representative of a bridging of the phenomenological and behavioral views?

EF: No, but it shows that these two approaches can supplement each other.

REK: I was very impressed with the cooperative work that was done by so many individuals in that study. Your use of graduate students and volunteers allowed for the significant piece of research to be done at a minimum of costs. Was this intended as a model for future research now that funding has become scarcer?

EF: That was not the original intention. We had to do it this way because I didn't get a grant. But I wasn't going to give up this research. It was very important for me. Grants for hypnosis research were really hard to get 20 or 30 years ago than they are now. Fortunately, I had a group of devoted students around me. When they saw how interesting the research would be and how passionately I was interested in doing it, they agreed to work for me without pay. I hope that other researchers may take this as an example and stimulate their students to become idealists rather than materialists.

REK: In your book Hypnotherapy and Hypnoanalysis coauthored with Daniel Brown, (Earleban Publishers, 1986) there is a separation of Erickson's approaches and the permissive approach. Many of the techniques used by Erickson are described in the permissive section. In your view, did Erickson's work influence the development of the permissive approach?

EF: Yes of course. He invented some approaches, but others invented similar approaches at the same time. There was a book that came out in 1949, Hypnotherapy of War Neurosis, by John G. Watkins (New York: Ronald Press). It is long out of print, but I have a copy of it. He used and advocated permissive hypnosis in that book already.

Another book was written by Gill and Brenman, the originators of hypnoanalysis, was published in 1959 (Gill, M.M. & Brenman, M., Hypnosis and Related States: Psychoanalytic Studies in Regression, New York: International Universities Press). It also has references to the permissive approaches. I have carried the study of hypnoanalysis further than they had.

The development of the permissive approach had to do with the turning away from the authoritarianism of the time. It was like democracy and not keeping people under your thumb. Now I may have a stronger view, being a refugee and because I hate the Nazis and authoritarianism, but the tenor of the times is the reason why everything changes. Hypnosis in the 1930s was different than it is today because we fought the Nazis and authoritarianism in the 1940s, I feel.

If Erickson invented the permissive approach, and the others took after him, then I certainly want him to get the credit, but I think that the permissive methods definitely preceded him. The techniques evolved from a 'zeitgeist,' the kind of environment present. There were a lot of people about that same time who were beginning to use the permissive approach. Oftentimes, such things happen by themselves in a way.

Let me give you another example. A Dutch painter of the 17th century, Hieronymus Bosch, did realistic painting that used symbols. His paintings really require psychoanalytic interpretation. They are clearly psychoanalytic, but no one had written about this. I wrote an article, and had it sent in to a journal, but I had not yet received an answer. And suddenly, I opened another journal and someone had written a psycho-

analytic interpretation of Hieronymus Bosch! None had been written for two centuries. Then, two people knowing nothing about each other, in different locations, right at the very same time decide to write about the same thing. Both articles were published because they were somewhat different. Somehow the time was right for this to happen.

The permissive approach was invented by many people at the same time too. Erickson invented a confusion technique that I use. This is a technique where you use suggestions on the the way into trance going down deep, deep, deep, and then you use those same suggestions on the way up out of the trance and quickly alternate the two. It takes real virtuosity to use Ericksonian confusion techniques. I cannot use any others because I get confused before the patient gets confused.

REK: The Evolution of Psychology Conferences have been fertile meeting grounds for eminent psychotherapists of diverse backgrounds. Do you believe that this exchange of information will lead developing therapists away from specific schools of thought to a more eclectic or complementary approach? Will this benefit psychotherapy?

EF: I certainly view those conferences as positive things. These conferences are excellent. There are two kinds of eclecticism. The first is superficial: it is one in which one is not committed to any approach, but takes from many different approaches without any firm direction, taking a little bit here, and a little bit there, and a little bit there. The other kind is one in which there is first a commitment to one approach and then one takes the best things from many other approaches and uses those things to expand one's own basic approach. These are both eclecticism.

Some of the people who attend these conferences don't have a solid background. If they come with basic knowledge, the conference can make them less orthodox and more open-minded. There are good things that come from other approaches. Too much commitment to one theory actually is not good. Many psychoanalysts are totally committed to psychoanalysis. I'm not. I am a psychoanalyst, but I will take other tools into my tool chest. I will take parts of other theories and use them with concepts that are psychoanalytic, and also with concepts that play a great role in hypnosis, and also with concepts in comparative psychology. I wrote a paper two years ago in the journal, Consciousness and Cognition (1992, 1, 40-46) free about how we are going to do with dis...
sociation, cognition, repression, and voluntarism. It's a psychoanalytic paper, but it's about the structure of consciousness and unconsciousness. A lot of the thoughts I expressed in this paper belong in the field of cognitive psychology.

I think it is extraordinary to have the opportunity to hear other theories and that kind of eclecticism is fine. But if you superficially take the crumbs, it reminds me of streusel cake. This is a cake, the top of which is covered with little balls that are made from sugar and butter. The top is very tasty, but if you just pick at the top, you have no base. You have to have a solid base and a solid commitment to a theory, and then add other things to it.

Does it lead developing therapists away from specific schools of thought? It starts them to think of the choices. There is not just one way to Rome. This allows them, on the basis of their solid knowledge, to select other things that they might add. Such a conference should commit people to read more in other areas. You can start to change your views; with a week's conference you can learn and begin to change. These conferences are excellent. Hopefully, the leaders in these fields also will become interested in learning more.

**REK:** What current trends do you think will have the greatest importance on the future of hypnotherapy?

**EF:** At the moment there is a lot of interest in PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and MPD (multiple-personality disorder). This is much more than a passing wave of interest. In this wave, there is debate over false memory issues. There are two camps over false memory issues, and that split is a very dangerous kind of thing. There are people who believe that most of the false memories are produced by the therapist and there are many others who say these things could not be produced by the therapist. As far as I am concerned, neither position is right. False memories can be produced by therapists if they suggest them. But only poorly trained and unscrupulous therapists would produce false memories. The false memory movement could kill hypnosis altogether, and then those patients who have really suffered trauma could not be helped anymore.

My personal view is that in psychoanalysis for 100 years it was all the Oedipus complex. Then we came to see that there may be incest too, and not all is just a fantasy. Then there comes a period in which suddenly incest seems to come out of the walls. The pendulum swings from one side to the other, and I think that it has swung too far. There are many people who have suffered sexual abuse. Some of the abuse could be false memories, yes. And it is very hard to decide which is false and which is not. Just because it is a fashion does not mean that we are producing it. There are some people who, particularly with hypnosis, could produce it, but responsible people in hypnosis will not suggest it. Zeitgeist plays a role. Even if there is no hypnotherapist, abuse is in the newspaper. One can give self suggestions. With imagery, you can change certain things, and in a memory you can also change certain things. This, at the moment, is of the greatest importance, because it could kill hypnosis.

**REK:** From your knowledge about professional organizations, what do you consider to be the most pressing priority for professional organizations interested in the advancement of the professional use of hypnosis?

**EF:** In hypnosis you have to be so awfully careful that you don't suggest something. The most important thing is to get over this trouble with false memories. In psychology, we have false negatives and false positives. With a false positive, people think that something has happened, but it hasn't. With a false negative, people think that something has not happened, but it has.

The people to whom abuse has happened should be given the opportunity to get therapy. At this moment, this is the most pressing thing. In general, the most pressing priority for organizations who deal with hypnosis is the advancement of ethics and ethical standards.