Hypnosis, the Hidden Observer, and Not-So-Hidden Consent

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In reading an article I wrote with my colleagues (Lynn, Mare, Kvaal, Segal, Sivec, 1994) some time ago, it occurred to me that we did not provide the reader with sufficient caveats regarding the potential risk of pseudomemories and the dangers of reifying metaphors offered to clients in the process of clinical hypnosis. In that article, we examined the proposition that hidden observer instructions could have a therapeutic use in combination with hypnotic dream and age regression suggestions. We took pains to emphasize that we regard the hidden observer as an imaginative creation that is best thought of in metaphorical terms. Indeed, the research we reported in the article, and that is discussed extensively elsewhere (Kirsch & Lynn, 1998), indicates that the “hidden observer” is shaped by social demands and expectancies and does not, in fact, represent dissociated elements of the personality. Furthermore, we concluded by stating that “Caution… must be used in administering hidden observer suggestions to highly dissociative, highly suggestible clients who would be prone to reifying the metaphor of the hidden observer and incorporating it into a presentation of multiple personality” (p. 141).

Despite these caveats, it bears emphasizing that caution must be exercised with all clients – dissociative or otherwise. Additionally, I believe that prudent clinical practice dictates clearly stating in an informed consent document that hidden observers, and for that matter, “inner advisors,” “ego states,” and related metaphors, are in no way true personality fragments or independent entities with distinct past histories. Rather, they are merely metaphors for the fact that different experiences and perspectives on situations and personal problems can be accessed when situational demands are conducive to examining one’s life in fresh ways. In fact, a careful clinical assessment to insure that clients are not likely to construe such metaphors as personality “segments,” “fragments,” or “parts” of the personality in a larger system of “multiple personalities,” is necessary before any intervention is contemplated, much less initiated.

My belief is that the above metaphors should never be used in the context of age regression to recover (accurate) memories of forgotten past events. Such procedures might give the client the false impression that whatever information is recalled is accurate. This is not the case (see Lynn, Lock, Myers, & Payne, 1998), and this point should be explicated in an informed consent document. Indeed, in my opinion, age regression should not be used to recover supposedly suppressed, repressed, or dissociated memories regardless of whether hidden observer or related metaphors are brought into the therapy arena.

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References

