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Many Lives, Many Traumas: The
Hypnotic Construction of Memory

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INTRODUCTION

Memory is a complicated thing, a relative to truth but not its twin.—*Barbara Kingsolver*

Many serious questions have been raised recently about the extent to which therapists may inadvertently aid clients to invent, rather than discover, memories of past abuse (Loftus, 1993; Loftus & Ketcham, 1994; Ofshe & Watters, 1994; Spanos, Menary, Gabora, DuBreuil, & Dewhirst, 1991; Spiegel & Schefflin, 1994; Yapko, 1994). Some clinicians, such as Terr (1994) and Cheek (1994), are relatively

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confident that they can distinguish true from false memories. Terr (1994) bases her judgments on the degree to which symptoms correspond with the memory in question: "If a child is exposed to a shocking, frightening, painful, or overexciting event, he or she will exhibit psychological signs of having had the experience" (p. 161); however, if "a child is exposed only to a frightening rumor . . . the child may pick up a symptom or two . . . but will not suffer a cluster of symptoms and signs" (p. 161). Cheek relies on the way in which memories are accessed and reported: "I [can] be sure of the source of a memory when there [is] a [particular] sequence in the process of its elevation from a physiological horizon of awareness toward the conscious one where it [can] be reported verbally" (p. 280).

Other clinicians and researchers are more circumspect. For example, Schacter (1996) asserts that "there is no research that allows clinicians or scientists to judge unequivocally the historical truth of a traumatic memory recovered in therapy" (p. 274). Yapko (1993) cautions that therapists working with clients to "retrieve" traumatic memories must be aware of their ability to "inadvertently collude in creating a skewed perspective" (p. 36). "It is 'precisely because it is often nearly impossible to prove or disprove someone's memory that the role of therapists is so critical'" (Yapko, 1994, p. 81). Without wise therapeutic guidance, such writers caution, clients may erroneously accept the detailed richness of a hypnotic experience as confirmatory evidence of the historical truth of a created "memory" (P. B. Bloom, 1994; Loftus, 1993; Lynn, Rhue, Myers, & Weekes, 1994; Spanos et al., 1991; Stevenson, 1994; Yapko, 1993, 1994).

This chapter explores both the hypnotic technology and client phenomenology of memory construction. Others have talked in a general way about how "leading questions" of the "have-you-stopped-beating-your-wife?" variety can create memories, and experimenters such as Loftus and Spanos have provided some specific scripts for indirectly suggesting particular untrue "realities" for subjects. We offer a theoretical discussion of how a therapist's use of language can contextualize clients' experience. These ideas are then illustrated with an edited transcription of a hypnotic demonstration between a therapist (D. F., the first author) and a volunteer client (K. W., the second author), as well as interspersed comments and

descriptions from both participants. We adapted procedures from the tradition of Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR)—a discovery-oriented, qualitative research method developed by Kagan for studying psychotherapeutic process (Elliott, 1984, 1986)—to help our "stimulated recall" (B. S. Bloom, cited in Elliott, 1986, p. 503) of what we were experiencing and thinking during the demonstration.

IPR involves the researchers' taping an interaction (such as a therapy session) and then, soon after, playing the tape back for one or more of the participants. In one application of the procedure, the researcher asks a client (or a therapist or both) to watch a videotape of a recent session and to stop the tape when something significant seems to be happening. The person is encouraged to freely recall and describe, with as much detail as possible, the thoughts and feelings he or she was experiencing at that point in time. The tape is then restarted and the process is repeated. The researcher tapes these reflections and then prepares a transcript that combines the original therapeutic interaction with the added commentary.

There are a number of potential threats to validity in IPR studies. Research participants may not be able to recall what they were experiencing, they may have difficulty finding the appropriate words, or they may strive to tell the researcher what they think he or she wants to hear (Elliott, 1986, pp. 518–519). However, as a discovery-oriented approach, IPR "allows the researcher to gather information on the moment-to-moment perceptions, intentions, and reactions of clients and therapists during therapy sessions, subjective impressions which are missing from even the best transcriptions or recordings of therapy sessions" (Elliott, p. 505).

We adapted the IPR protocol to some extent in our project. The hypnotic demonstration was audiotaped but not videotaped, so we were limited by not having access to a visual record of our interaction, and we were researching ourselves, which restricted the degree to which we could examine what happened from a neutral perspective. In addition, our single-case focus constrained our ability to generalize from the particularities of this interaction. Nevertheless, we believe that the transcript, augmented with the juxtaposed perspectives of the therapist and client, helps to demonstrate how therapists can influence clients' memories and their judgments about them.

PAST TRAUMAS AND PAST LIVES

The issue of sexual abuse and suggested memory became the topic of discussion during the second class meeting of a hypnosis course taught by the first author (D. F.) to doctoral students in a family therapy program. Opinions were voiced by various class members that surely a client could somehow distinguish between true and false memories. Other students disagreed, arguing that there was no easy way to tell the difference. The divergence in the class mirrored the polarization in the therapeutic community as a whole, where, as noted above, experts have publicly taken diametrically opposed positions regarding the potential accuracy of "recovered memories."¹

Rather than didactically reviewing the literature, D. F. set up an opportunity for the class to observe, as directly as possible, what can happen in a therapist's office. He asked for someone to volunteer for a demonstration, but he did not wish to show how memory could be created around the issue of sexual abuse, as the potential for harm to the volunteer would far outweigh any potential insight on the part of the students. He thus asked what the class knew about a related issue, the phenomenon of recalled past lives. About half were familiar with the work of Brian Weiss (1988); for the benefit of those who weren't, one of the class members who had read Weiss's *Many Lives, Many Masters* provided, at D. F.'s request, a succinct account of the book, including Weiss's proclamations of the scientific nature of his hypnotic inquiry into the past lives of one of his clients. It was at this juncture that D. F. ventured the idea that a demonstration of a past-life regression could perhaps be instructive. Spanos et al. (1994, pp. 435–436) described how a

1. For example, in such trials as that of George Franklin, who, based on his daughter's testimony, was found guilty of the murder of Susan Nason 20 years after her death. His daughter, Eileen Lipsker, claimed to have recovered a repressed memory of the event. Lenore Terr and Elizabeth Loftus served as expert witnesses for the prosecution and defense, respectively (see Terr, 1994; Loftus & Ketcham, 1994). Six years after the trial, in July 1996, Franklin was released from prison. His conviction was overturned on appeal, and prosecutors decided that they could not successfully retry him.

hypnotist's expectations and beliefs can influence a subject's experience; accordingly, D. F. was careful not to reveal his critical views of past-life phenomena. He asked if anyone would like to volunteer for the demonstration, and one of the students (K. W.) came forward.

Despite the obvious differences between the intentional creation of a past-life memory with a voluntary participant and the unintentional construction of a memory of sexual abuse with a symptomatic client, we believe comparable language practices underlie both phenomena. People who have challenged the applicability of Loftus's experimental findings (e.g., Bass, reported in Loftus & Ketcham, 1994, p. 212; Terr, 1994, pp. 51–52) might direct similar criticisms against this contention. However, according to Ofshe and Watters (1994), the therapeutic procedures for helping clients recall past lives are very similar to those designed to help clients recover past traumas:

Many therapists . . . recoil at the comparison of past-life regression (or space-alien-abduction stories created through hypnosis) and recovered memory therapy . . . [claiming] that to compare . . . past-life therapy to that of child-abuse survivors belittles the experience of child abuse. . . . However, [there are] . . . obvious parallels between the way recovered memories are found and the procedures that build other, obviously false beliefs. (pp. 164–165)

A good example of such parallels can be found in the work of Brian Weiss, who, prior to his dedication to helping people recall their past lives, "routinely used hypnosis to uncover his patients' histories of sexual abuse" (Ofshe & Watters, 1994, p. 165). In the following section, we will explicate how a therapist's use of language can account for the phenomenon of "invented memories," whether they are about past traumas or past lives.

LANGUAGE, THOUGHT, AND EXPERIENCE

When therapists make suggestions, offer comments, or pose questions to clients, they direct the focus, and thus limit the scope, of

clients' thought processes. But unless clients take umbrage at a question or in some way feel uncomfortable with what is being suggested, they typically will not consciously notice the contextual constraints being imposed on their experience. As long as they feel safe, trust the therapist, and don't question what is being asked of them, they will look where the therapist's finger is pointing, not at the finger itself.

This contextual shaping of cognitive processes can most easily be recognized in Erickson's double-bind questions, in which clients are offered an "illusion of alternatives," such as, "Will your right hand lift or press down or move to the side first? Or will it be your left?" (Erickson & Rossi, 1980, p. 423). By freely engaging in a search for answers to these questions, clients accept the premise—the contextual limitation—that connects each of the possibilities ("Something will happen with one of my hands."). Unless clients direct their scrutiny to the questions themselves ("Who says *anything* will happen with my hands?") or to the hypnotist ("Just what are you trying to pull?")—that is, unless they turn their attention to the pointing finger or to the person pointing it—their freedom of choice is invisibly determined by the options offered.

Double-bind questions clearly demonstrate how language can delimit the range of clients' thought or experience, but therapists contextualize their clients' thinking in other ways besides the posing of multiple-choice queries. Questions and statements communicate therapists' tacit assumptions about who clients are (e.g., "How long have you been so sensitive/angry/resourceful/resistant?") or what they have been, are, or are capable of doing (e.g., "I can't believe how much you've learned/forgotten/improved/decompensated."). When clients attend to and follow the direction indicated by the *explicit content* of therapists' utterances, they also necessarily accept, as part of the "linguistic package," the *implicit premises* behind what the therapists are saying.

Consider, for illustration, some of the comments and questions that therapists have reportedly offered to new clients: "Your symptoms make it sound like you were sexually abused when you were a child. What can you tell me about that?" "You sound to me like the sort of person who must have been sexually abused. Tell me what that bastard did to you" (Loftus, 1993, p. 526). If clients fol-

low the direction indicated by such finger-pointing, their scope of possible answers will be predetermined by the assumptions informing therapists' statements and questions.

According to Schacter (1996), "the subjective experiences of recollecting a past event" are not equivalent to "the stored fragments of an episode" in the brain. It is "often assumed that a retrieval cue merely arouses or activates a memory that is slumbering in the recesses of the brain," but Schacter argues that the cue combines with these stored fragments to create "a new, emergent entity—the recollective experience of the rememberer—that differs from either of its constituents" (p. 70). This helps explain how clients who are being given both explicit and implicit (contextual) cues by their therapists could subjectively experience the imaginative results of their internal search as the recapturing of a previously unreachable memory. In the following demonstration, the therapist intentionally uses the language practices described above to encourage just such a result.

DEMONSTRATION OF A "PAST-LIFE REGRESSION"

Although volunteering for the demonstration of a past-life regression, K. W. indicated quite definitively that she did not embrace the notion of multiple lives. D. F. commented on this and expressed appreciation for her skepticism, as it would, he suggested, help enrich the experience she was about to have and the learning of the class who would be observing.

D. F. (hypnotist): And so . . . what would it take for you . . . to actually experience a past life that would provide some sense of credibility to you?

K. W. (volunteer): Maybe an awareness of something that I wouldn't (laughter) normally be aware of. . . .

D. F.: So for you to actually get in touch with an experience from a previous life, for you to be able to feel that in some sort of cogent way, would be some sense of a confirmation for you?

K. W.: Mm-hmm[nodding yes].

D. F.: So you wouldn't have to necessarily just discount it?

D. F. Comment: These questions implied that the volunteer, despite her skepticism, could experience something that would serve as "proof" of the contention that past lives exist. And the burden of proof was given to her, to be judged in retrospect by the intensity (and thus, by implication, the credibility) of her experience. Johnson, Foley, Suengas, and Raye (1988, p. 371) suggest that "reality monitoring" (i.e., the discrimination between perceived and imagined events) can break down as a function of the vividness of the "memory" (see also Spanos et al., 1991, p. 319).

K. W.: Right.

K. W. Comment: At this point, I was skeptical that I would experience anything.

D. F. Comment: I proceeded with a fairly brief hypnotic induction, the beginning of which is not relevant to this discussion. After some suggestions for eye closure, I talked about all the different means of conveyance with which a person can return home in this life² and then introduced the notion that there are also ways of traveling home to a previous existence.

D. F.: Just as your car can return you to [pause] the place where you used to live or the plane returns [you] home in some way [pause], it may be possible for you to begin to be aware in some corner of your awareness—it could be the right corner, could be the bottom right corner, it might be the upper left or it might be behind you, and of course you do have a 360-degree vista to explore—

D. F. Comment: Note the illusion of alternatives: The question of whether or not the volunteer *could* or *would* become aware of some aspect of a past life was removed by focusing her attention on exactly *where* in her field of vision she would first become aware of it.

²The sound of airplanes taking off was prevalent throughout the demonstration.

D. F.: —aware that there is home in St. Louis [K. W.'s birthplace], but then there are other homes, certainly subsequent homes, that time is a variable phenomenon and when you think in circles it is sometimes easy to recognize that forwards can take you backwards [pause]. And finding yourself home [pause], home in a place and in a time that you would consciously find ridiculous or at least surprising.

D. F. Comment: I attached any sort of discounting response to her conscious understanding, implying thereby that her *unconscious* may not find the experience ridiculous or surprising at all. A therapist who suggests to a potentially sexually abused client that she may remember things that seem incredible or shocking, so much so that she might have trouble believing them, helps set up the possibility that the client's healthy incredulity will be suspended.

D. F.: If you were to discover somewhere in that 360-degree vista [pause] . . . that's it, more and more comfortable, to see the beginnings [pause] of a vista that you wouldn't have otherwise or before now realized was home.

K. W. Comment: As D. F. said this, I began having the sensation of moving, of bumping up and down. It was most odd. This bumpiness was different from anything I ever remember experiencing. It was a very gentle sort of bumpiness—soothing, not jostling. And as he continued to speak, I discovered that I was in a covered wagon, and that I belonged there. I saw myself there in that wagon and knew that I was there in that place.

D. F.: But it can feel so much like home because you know you belong there [pause]. You have never been there before in *this* lifetime and yet how wonderful to be able to have that sense of belonging, that sense of being right there then, which can become now as you move and travel there and begin to see it taking form, and I don't know if it'll start in one part of your awareness

and begin to grow or whether, that's right, or whether it'll just grab you and become clearer and clearer where you are in it. Yes. Can you tell me what it is that you're seeing now?

D. F. Comment: Once I could find out some of the details of what K. W. was experiencing, I could mirror them back to her, thereby intensifying her involvement. As I asked this question, it was clear from her nonverbal responses that she was surprised and somewhat dismayed by what was transpiring, so I followed with:

D. F.: And part of you can recognize how ridiculous it is,

K. W.: Mm-hmm [affirming].

K. W. Comment: I was having difficulty believing that I was actually seeing myself in this covered wagon.

D. F.: And yet it is possible, isn't it, to see it clearly?

K. W.: Mm-hmm [affirming].

D. F.: And what is it that you see?

K. W.: It's crazy.

D. F.: Yeah, it *is* crazy.

K. W.: [Laughs, opens eyes.]

D. F.: And you can continue, if you like, to see it with your eyes open . . . [pause] . . . If it helps . . . [pause] . . . and what's the craziest thing about it?

K. W.: That I don't belong.

K. W. Comment: It was very uncomfortable for me to be in the classroom and in a covered wagon simultaneously. It felt ridiculous. I knew I didn't belong in a covered wagon! I wanted to affirm that I was still in the classroom even though I was seeing myself and feeling myself to be somewhere else, so I opened my eyes.

D. F.: Yeah, you don't belong and yet you have a sense of belonging.

K. W.: Yeah, of being there.

K. W. Comment: This was so very vivid for me. I did have a sense of being there, of belonging in this covered wagon. There was a gentleness and comforting familiarity, and I didn't want to talk

about it. One part of my mind was racing and the other was experiencing this soothing peacefulness.

D. F.: Yeah. And what's the most pertinent thing about what you're seeing there? What stands out the most?

K. W.: It's bumpy.

D. F.: It *is* bumpy, isn't it? And can you tell, the bumps are what?

K. W.: They're bumping. I'm in a covered wagon [laughing].

D. F.: Yeah, you're moving with the covered wagon.

K. W.: Uh-huh [affirming].

D. F.: And are there, how many horses . . . [pause] . . . just pulling your wagon? [pause] Are you in the back?

D. F. Comment: I inferred the presence of horses so asked the number. By encouraging her to see a particular number of horses, rather than just "horses," I was making it possible for her to discern specific details.

K. W.: No [pause], I'm up in the front.

D. F.: You're riding. Uh [pause], and how many in the caravan? [pause]

K. W.: Just me.

K. W. Comment: The place seemed like the Dakota's, wide-open, rolling hills. The grass was green and almost looked golden in places where the sun was shining down.

D. F.: Just you. And is it just you in the wagon?

K. W.: Uh-uh [gesturing no].

K. W. Comment: Before this point I hadn't really attended to the presence of a man riding next to me in the wagon. When D. F. asked his question, I thought, "Don't you see him? He's right next to me." I changed my focus from the landscape to my companion, and as I turned my head, I began to notice more and more about him.

D. F.: You're with someone important?

K. W.: Uh-huh. [affirming].

D. F.: Can you describe this person?

K. W.: He has a beard.

D. F.: Has a beard. Is it a long beard or a short beard?

K. W.: Long.

D. F.: Long. Is it dark or light?

K. W.: Kinda medium light.

D. F.: Medium light. And who is holding the reins, you or him?

D. F. Comment: The double bind questions I asked helped K. W. to construct a most detailed picture of the man sitting next to her.

K. W. Comment: The more D. F. questioned me, the more my awareness developed in focus and richness of detail.

D. F. Comment: I now began to encourage K. W. to "remember" more than just a snapshot, to become involved in an unfolding *story* with a past and a future.

D. F.: Do you know yet where you're headed? [pause]

D. F. Comment: The "yet" implies that she if she doesn't now know, she will.

K. W.: No. Well, yeah kinda.

D. F.: You kinda have an understanding because you talked about it, didn't you, about where you were gonna go?

K. W.: Yeah, but the plans change.

D. F.: Well, it always changes doesn't it? Have they already changed or are they about to change?

K. W.: They're already changing.

D. F.: They're already changing, having started, 'cause you have to change your course to evolve, in order to adapt to the circumstances [pause]. But what is it that you're coming to now? Can you hear it? Is that a rushing sound?

D. F. Comment: I had set up the possibility for something to happen, but left it to K. W. to discover or invent what it was. These and a number of subsequent questions evoked, rather than specified, the drama that was about to unfold.

K. W.: I don't know.

D. F.: Is that the wind? . . . What is that smell?

K. W.: Scary.

K. W. Comment: I now saw that a prairie fire lay ahead. Dark gray smoke billowed on the horizon and as the smell of it reached me, I felt fear in the pit of my stomach.

D. F. Comment: Over the next number of minutes, the fire was safely negotiated and the "past-life regression" was brought to a satisfactory completion. The volunteer's fear dissipated and she re-oriented to her colleagues and the classroom feeling relaxed and a little perplexed.

K. W. Comment: Overall, I found the experience rather pleasant and playful. As a staunch nonbeliever, I did not embrace the notion of past lives to explain the seeming reality of what happened. However, I wonder how I would have reacted had I begun with any sense of equivocation, either by virtue of a confusion on my part or a certainty on the part of D. F. I strongly suspect I would have left class that night convinced by the detailed richness of my "memory" that this was but one of many past lives that could be found.

DISCUSSION

Spanos et al. (1991) found three distinct variables affecting the degree of credibility subjects gave to their past-life experiences: Past-life responders assigned relatively high credibility ratings to their experiences when their initial beliefs, attitudes, and expectations concerning reincarnation were positive, their past-life fantasies were subjectively intense, and the hypnotist defined past-life experiences as real rather than imaginary. (p. 319)

K. W.'s past-life regression was intense, but that was not enough to change her initial skepticism. No doubt her belief was further solidified when D. F. clarified at the end of the demonstration that he considered such phenomena to be a function of language and imagination.

At the beginning of his course the following year, D. F. once again held back his views on past-life regression from his students

class.³ The woman who volunteered found herself looking through the eyes of a small boy living in Ireland at an earlier point in history. She didn't interpret this as a return to a past life per se, but rather as an accessing of a genetically transmitted family memory from several generations back. She thus knew that she herself wasn't the boy but that she could, through him, recapture an incident in the life of one of her ancestors. The boy was under a table in an inn, and from this vantage he could hear the distant sound of bagpipes, heralding the arrival of soldiers. Knowing with dreadful certainty that the soldiers were intent on wiping out his village, the boy was deeply saddened by the passivity and lack of awareness of the others in the inn. No one but he was paying attention to what was happening.

After the demonstration had ended, the student felt a sense of relief at finally understanding why the sound of bagpipes had always held an eerie, disquieting fascination for her and why it so easily triggered an emotional reaction. Her experience in hypnosis vividly sharpened, further defined, and coalesced fragmentary images that had been floating on the edge of her awareness for some years. She said later that D. F. "most certainly did not lead" her in any way.

More recently, as part of a 7-day hypnosis workshop, D. F. outlined his ideas about language and therapist-directed remembering *before* asking for a past-life-regression volunteer. A woman came forward, and D. F. worked with her for about an hour. She got as far as recognizing a diaphanous light and feeling a sense of warmth and of being enveloped, but she saw no other images and felt no other sensations. Later, the volunteer said that she knew she was more "New Agey" than D. F. and thus hadn't wanted to venture into a past life with him. She interpreted her experience as having been in a womb waiting to be born, and she assumed that in other circumstances, with someone who believed in her ability to access this life, she would feel comfortable being born into it.

Our work says nothing about people's ability to remember past events accurately. Rather, we have concerned ourselves with those

³The volunteer was, in fact, aware of D. F.'s opinions on the topic; however, when D. F. offered to do a demonstration, she assumed he had rethought his position.

times when a search of the past can be implicitly contextualized by a therapist's suggestions, comments, and questions. We have attempted to theoretically articulate and clinically illustrate how this latter process can happen—how an attempt at remembering can become, at least in part, an experience of unrecognized imagining. However, without the rigorous structure of a well-designed and well-executed empirical study, we are limited in the conclusions we can draw and the extent to which we can generalize from these anecdotes and our IPR-influenced study. We offer, instead, the understandings we have reached from our involvement in this project.

Language weaves through our experience, giving it shape and meaning. And because language is shared, our articulated imaginations are never singular, never isolated within our heads. As therapists we would do well to remain sensitive to the ways our focused conversations with clients, whether structured by formal hypnosis or not, necessarily contextualize their experience. Without an explicit recognition of the particular ways we can contribute to the creation and intensity of our client's "memories," whether of past lives or past traumas, we might well find our own belief systems swayed by the seeming reality of what our clients report. If it can happen to Brian Weiss's beliefs about past lives (1988, pp. 57–59), it can happen to other therapists when they encounter clients who have seemingly very real memories of past abuse. It thus behooves us as therapists not to use our skills to try to help our clients find some sort of objective and certain "truth" about their pasts, but to hold neutral expectations and to find a balance between support for, and critical evaluation of, uncovered material (Hammond et al., 1995, p. 37). Just as we participate in the accessing of memories, so too we contribute to the social construction of memories (Loftus & Ketcham, 1994; Spanos et al., 1994). The nature of the search determines in part what it is possible to find; let us not, then, find ourselves naively uncovering covered wagons.

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