

Hypnosis & Bodywork

Part I: Trancework

by *Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar*

*There are no more unknown islands, they're all on the maps [said the king].
Only the known islands are on the maps [replied the man].*

José Saramago (1)

1. Introduction

This article is the first part of two papers that will present the sphere of using changework tools through bodywork. Part I: "Trancework" offers the framework: examining the concepts of trance and trancework; looking at the presuppositions of body–mind interaction and their utilisation. Part I defines the metaphor of trance and changework, serving as a theoretical background for Part II: "Trancework in the body," that will offer more clinical insights into hypnosis and bodywork. Part II will examine some of the applications of trancework in bodywork.

A word about "unconscious." NLP–psychotherapist and trainer Pamela Gawler–Wright drew my attention to the dichotomic and mechanistic nature of the term "unconscious," and to the appropriate alternative of the term "somatic" to cover all areas that are, at a certain point of time, outside our conscious awareness. I shall therefore refer to "somatic processes" rather than to "unconscious processes," recognizing bodymind unity on a linguistic level as well.

2. What is trancework?

The Strength of doing trancework comes from undefinable sources within each human being... there is a remarkable potential in each person that surfaces during those states of absorption called trance.

Michael D. Yapko (2)

The definition of trance (just as the definition for hypnosis) is slippery. I guess there are nearly as many perspectives on this issue as there are therapists, and probably even some more. Some practitioners choose a narrow definition of trance and hypnosis, confining it to the hypnotic process of induction—changework (usually suggestions and imagery work)—disengagement; others define it in a broader way. For me, **hypnosis is parallel communication with somatic processes**, and **trance is the context from whence this communication is done**. Looking at hypnosis from this angle, trancework is a widely spread phenomenon, that can be found in many areas, beginning with education, through most relationships and communications processes, to dreams, fantasies, and most kinds of creative activities.

However, even when holding a narrower definition of hypnosis, trance is a common phenomenon in everyday life, and a very dominant element in most kinds of therapies. Freud, although not recognizing it as such, had contributed to the field of hypnosis mainly after he had "abandoned" formal hypnosis. The free association method he developed (which is still a main tool in psychoanalysis), is a powerful way to access and utilise "unconscious" resources, much

more effectively than his former rigid inductions and trancework, used when he was “formally” hypnotising. Today, Freud’s free-association is recognized by many as trancework, and so are Gestalt, TA, psychodrama and numerous other approaches. Hypnotherapy as a separate realm dedicated to bring about change through somatic vehicles, becomes an approach practised not only by those who call themselves hypnotherapists and NLP therapists, but also by many other effective communicators and therapists.

What do I mean by “communication with the somatic processes?” Well, to some extent all information is ALSO processed outside our immediate awareness, hence on somatic levels, so all communication—interpersonal and intrapersonal as well—can be regarded as somatic (or non-conscious) for that matter. The definition is therefore quantitative rather than qualitative; there are times when information is mostly processed somatically with little or no interference of conscious agents. An example of this is ideodynamic responses, or immediate responses to suggestions, when the critical faculty stops serving as a relay station for information—an important element for “formal” trance (Dave Elman regards it as a prerequisite. (3)) In trance we cease to operate on a linear, causative logic and process data in a multifaceted, parallel way— involving more than one system of sense-making (more than conscious awareness).

In fact, we experience trance whenever we shift from our primary perception mode to another. When we experience our reality slightly differently to the way we are used to, we enter a powerful yet vulnerable stance. Its power, as well as its vulnerability derive from the fact that we are then more flexible than usual. What is so powerful about being flexible? What is so vulnerable about being flexible?

Being flexible is a virtue up to a point. An equation with no variables is static and boring (dead?), yet stable and without risks. On the other hand, an equation with nothing but variables and no constants is flexible and infinite but also inapplicable and confusing. We humans are the most flexible of animals: we can adapt and readjust ourselves to many situations, yet basically we aspire to have some constants, some consistency; we need some security; we need maps. The dynamic balancing between

rigidity and flexibility is the movement between fixed-reality and fantasy. **This is why trance is so powerful: it is an opening to spheres of changework** (4). In trance, we get to see the world through wider lens, where things that we thought of as impossible or unreal can become our new reality. Trancework is vulnerable because in trance we question and change our basic assumptions about reality; it can be frightening because it invites change in, and we fear change. We fear that the scaffolds of our realm will be removed only to find that there is nothing there to replace them, nothing to hold us.

3. Unconscious resources

What am I saying? I’m saying love. And at the edge of love—there we stand.

Clarice Lispector (5)

“*Unconscious resources*” is a widely (and wildly) used expression in the realms of NLP and hypnotherapy. Therapists keep referring to the client’s own unconscious resources. The client has all the answers, they claim; all the possibilities lay within the client, they argue. What are these unconscious resources exactly? What is this organismic wisdom, in which they believe with such certainty?

In trancework the world loses its clear-cut, sharp boundaries, and turns into a flexible, changeable matrix. Naturally, we need to use some practical assumptions about the nature of the world. We ought to have some utility maps, so it is usually pragmatic to assume that this black thing under our feet is solid and safe to walk on; that our legs are capable of moving; that the seemingly small house there is simply distant and will get bigger as we approach it. All these assumptions may be necessary for our functioning, but they are not inevitably true. There are realities where other assumptions rule: being in love, for example, is a map with utterly different rules, we don’t see our loved one through regular lenses; dreaming is another example where other laws dictate reality. Everybody has constants in her life-equations, and most of us even share some common maps. It is only when we have enough constants in our

lives, that we can begin to explore the variables. Ground is a prerequisite for healthy and constructive trance.

By accessing somatic modes of operating, we open a door to infinite worlds of endless possibilities. **When a client changes his way of looking at his reality, his reality changes.** When an anxious person stops perceiving everything as a threat, the world suddenly becomes a nicer place in which to live.

So the first characteristic of this organismic unconscious wisdom is its flexibility and wealth of choices. The second one is the NLP presupposition regarding human valuing methodology: when given more choices, when the gate to more realities opens, our organism will choose the best possible option to the best of our knowledge. Both humanistic psychology and modern hypnotherapy share this assumption with NLP. It is not to say that there is an objective best reality, quite the contrary—the client, and the client alone can choose a reality that is best for her. For this reason many therapists are not willingly giving direct suggestions: imposing my values and belief system on the client is not a natural process; opening her to her own options is. James Lawley and Penny Tompkins developed a fascinating ritualistic approach to working with the clients' own metaphors (see 6).

Typically, when development is normal and healthy, a person has some access to this place of “reality–building,” of meta–reality (trance), so when her reality is not useful, or when there are more useful realities—she can shift to another world. For example, when you realise that, whereas smoking was a needed social strategy in your teens, it is no longer a useful (in this case—healthy) behaviour, you stop. However, we all tend to fixate on some aspects of our reality and become stagnant in some ways. **Stagnancy is blocking the access to changework and trance, getting a reality–bound fixation.** Since we crave for some constants we all tend to get “stuck” at times, fixated in an unwanted system; this is why smoke cessation is not always that easy.

Many clients who experience trancework for the “first time,” have a strong sense of familiarity, since **trance is our natural creative mode.** So our role as therapists bringing about change is to be guides. We introduce a forgotten path of multiple wonderlands to our clients,

where they have fewer limitations and richer choices. We make the exploration safe for them, acknowledge their reality and reinforce it by affirming their magic, and then, quietly—we leave the scene, allowing them to have some privacy in their newborn worlds.

4. The metaphor of the holistic approach

There it is, the sea, the most incomprehensible of non–human existences. And here is the woman, standing on the beach, the most incomprehensible of living beings.

Clarice Lispector (7)

The metaphor of the holistic approach claims that body, mind and spirit are all interrelated and interconnected. The need for this claim emerged from the dichotomic nature of both western medicine and western psychology, separating body and mind, and attending merely one aspect accordingly (For a more comprehensive discussion see (8).

Our mind can change our body, asserts the holistic metaphor. When we are stressed, stress hormones are secreted, altering most systems in the body—decreasing efficiency of the immune system, the digestive system, of cognitive processes and more. When we are happy and contented, our bodies are stronger. When we take a positive attitude towards life and disease—we fight it more efficiently. Our bodies, too, can influence our minds for better and for worse. Healers and believers would add a further layer—not only that mind and body are connected, but spirits also have a reciprocal relationship with the two: energies change realities and affect them (to read more about mind–body–spirit influences, see (9).

As modern therapists, you probably know how effective and comprehensive this view can be, especially in comparison with the dichotomic one: it simply allows true, embracing and enveloping healing to occur, without restricting it to

one level of being. Holistic medicine and therapies permit and facilitate growth in ways that were unfamiliar to western healthcare systems.

Still, successful as it might be, the holistic approach is a metaphor. It is not the only way to view reality, it is not the ultimate representative of "the truth." When we have a wealth of options to represent a reality, we need to remember that this is a **representation**, a way to crystallise our world into form: but should we choose another description, our world will change subsequently. Putting it simply, what I say is: *use the holistic metaphor inasmuch as it is useful in delivering change; when it is not—use another one.*

5. Using the holistic metaphor

The mind–body–spirit interrelation supplies the therapeutic space with an incredible wealth of healing potential. Accessing a change–mode (i.e., trance) can be facilitated either through touch, NLP or via other body or non–body modalities (such as breathing, body awareness, trigger points, character formations and more). Minimal cues of somatic processes may be quickly utilised to build upon, and we can use many languages to do changework. Here are some examples:

- The body: Working on bodily tissues, utilising their effect on emotions, on cognition and on spiritual levels is an important part of body–hypnotherapy.
- Emotions: Are being translated into physical signals, images and beliefs and then, when they are in an accessible space, worked with.
- Memories: Can be represented in the body and worked through (see 10).
- Transference: Inasmuch as we are all feedback-mechanisms (see also (11)), transference and projections are utilised on all levels—sliding from body to emotions, cognition and spirit to find the most convenient place to use them for the client.
- Chakra system: This is a very useful holistic approach, connecting developmental aspects of body, mind and spirit in a poetical way. Working with chakras is a coherent holistic language, and can be very liberating and exciting. (For a thorough study of the Chakra system in a therapeutic context see (12) 1996.)

The basic idea is that any change or growth would get more than one chance to occur and more than one level to manifest itself. For any desirable change there are channels which might prove more effective, so I try to introduce as many languages as possible by expanding the trancework to the body, mind, emotion and spirit. It doesn't matter where the client finds the best healing strategy, as long as it happens. We ought to do our best to increase the probability of its occurrence.

6. Beyond the holistic metaphor—unity

It is very difficult to elucidate this [cosmic religion] feeling to anyone who is entirely without it... The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling, which knows no dogma... In my view, it is the most important function of art and science to awaken this feeling and keep it alive in those who are receptive to it.

Albert Einstein (13)

One of the advantages of working through metaphors is that we are not bound to the use of a single system. Actually, using more than one metaphor for change is usually better, creating more chances for changework, allowing more growth.

There is one belief that serves as a basic premise for body-hypnotherapy, one axiomatic–metaphor (or, as Pam Gawler Wright calls it "a positive thought virus"): the ultimate unity of our organism. Even whilst using other metaphors—such as working with parts therapy–approaches, ideodynamic signalling or even in plain hypnotherapy—this belief is the core of my actions. It is the primal metaphor.

When explaining the laws of physics to a child, you sometimes need to present "wrong" postulates, in order to create a basic understanding. Describing electrons as

little balls that rotate around a bigger ball is a metaphor that helps a child to understand the principle structure of the atom, but it is not an accurate description.

The holistic metaphor is a very effective, accessible and common sense framework. Explaining world and changes in terms of reciprocal influences can be extremely potent and often very useful in initiating change. Yet deep inside, I don't believe in this metaphor. I don't believe that the body "reflects" the mind, and that spirits influence our bodymind system. I don't believe that god is effecting any of these systems or vice versa. My belief, my basic framework, is that there is no differentiation in us whatsoever. Human beings, as organisms, are whole and united. **Our bodies, our consciousness, our unconscious, our spirits—these are all one, all different languages and metaphors for saying the very same thing: I AM.**

This is why my initial effort in therapy is to bring myself, and acknowledge, respect and accept myself—and my client. When this is done, we can both play with the other metaphors as much as we wish, pretending that these are the cause for change. My clients usually share with me the illusion of change on many levels, whereas it is really done from an organismic, non-differentiated space. **While the infantile primal-trance is an extremely transformational metaphor, the organismic trance is divine.**

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