

BOOK REVIEWS

HAVENS, RONALD A. (Ed.) *The Wisdom of Milton H. Erickson*. New York: Irvington, 1985.
Pp. xxviii + 482. \$39.50 U.S.

By any standard, Milton H. Erickson was one of the seminal figures in 20th-century hypnosis research. His early experimental work, while often short on methodological rigor, has served succeeding generations of researchers as a fruitful source of observations and ideas concerning hypnotic effects on perception and memory, psychosomatic processes, and the like. With Houston and Shakow, he introduced Luria's (1932) technique for studying the effects of unconscious conflict, opening up for Western researchers a new method for the laboratory modelling of psychopathology (Houston, Shakow, & Erickson, 1934). For many clinicians, his anecdotes and case studies served as an impetus to try hypnosis in their own practice. And especially after his discovery by Jay Haley and others, his idea of the double bind, and his advocacy of capitalizing on the patient's personal resources in psychotherapy, have widely influenced the practice of nonhypnotic forms of psychotherapy.

The publication in 1980 of Erickson's *Collected papers* (currently in four volumes, the entire series yet still incomplete) indicated that we were in the midst of a sort of Erickson renaissance. As further evidence, we have the present book, bound in Erickson's favorite color purple. As stated in the preface, its purpose is to "attempt to clarify the concepts and attitudes necessary for an effective application of the Ericksonian forms of therapy and hypnosis [p. v.]." Rather than an objective analysis of Erickson's work, however, the editor has provided a synopsis, in Erickson's own words, of his observations and teachings. The result is kind of a cross between *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* and *Classics Illustrated*.

The book is organized into 13 chapters. One chapter summarizes Erickson's "objective" observations (as opposed to theoretical preconceptions) concerning human behavior—observations that, the editor claims, were the source of Erickson's wisdom. Several other chapters contain statements concerning human nature and appropriate therapeutic technique. The thrust of these may be gleaned from some of the section headings:

"Every person is unique"; "The primary joy of life is freedom"; "Unique people require unique interventions"; "Focus on the possible, not on perfection"; "Focus on the future, not on the past"; "Patients can and must do the therapy"; "Use whatever the patient presents"; "Use the patient's desires and expectations . . . language . . . emotions . . . resistance . . . symptoms".

Much of this seems like good advice—the kind of advice that a master therapist might give an apprentice or journeyman.

Some of the advice also seems contradictory. In one chapter we are told, again in terms of the section headings, that "Therapists must acknowledge the patient's reality"; but we are also told that "Patients are unreliable sources" and "Therapists must decipher what patients say." These contradictions are resolved to some extent in the actual text, but it is not for nothing that Erickson invented the confusion technique of hypnotic induction. There is a lot of material in these pages, and although the editor was impressed with the consistency of Erickson's position over the course of his writing career, it is also true that Erickson was consistently vague and self-contradictory. The reader who wants to synthesize what is offered here into a coherent system of therapy will still have some work to do.

Other chapters, concerning the nature of hypnosis and unconscious mental processes, seem to offer a wealth of hypotheses, just waiting to be tested by a seriously curious experimentalist. In one chapter, Erickson sets himself quite apart from those psychoanalysts who argued that the unconscious was primitive and irrational, and those dissociationists who held that the subconscious was qualitatively similar to conscious mental life. Erickson moves to the other pole entirely: "The unconscious is a storehouse [of] unknown potentials"; "The unconscious is brilliant . . . aware . . . childlike . . . universal"; "The unconscious perceives and responds literally [and] is the source of emotions". There are several chapters on

hypnosis, in which the reader is told that "Hypnosis involves focused attention" and that "Subjects become childlike and literal in deep trance." "Hypnosis offers access to unused potentials," but it "does not create new abilities." Erickson goes against the current laboratory emphasis on individual differences ("Anyone can be hypnotized"), and there is an entire chapter on specific techniques for inducing hypnosis ("Allow plenty of time"). There are two others on ideomotor responses, projection into the future, and other therapeutic techniques.

In his famous essay, Sutcliffe (1960, 1961) cited Erickson as an exemplar—indeed, the only one specifically named by him—of those espousing the credulous approach to hypnosis, and he (among others) is often characterized as viewing hypnotic subjects as passive, will-less automatons. The charge is false regarding certain prominent "state" theorists toward whom it is commonly directed, but I think that hypnotists of all persuasions thought it was valid when applied to Erickson. Apparently it was not: one section of the book is entitled "Hypnotized subjects are not automatons," and the reader is reminded that "Hypnosis requires the right atmosphere [and] depends upon cooperation," "Subjects create hypnosis," and "Subjects create internal realities via vivification"—that is, by connecting suggestions with memories of past experiences.

This is a book of aphorisms, and a book of hypotheses, but primarily it is a book for the fireside. The reader can leaf through it casually and be guaranteed to stumble on something that is interesting and provocative. But it is probably not a substitute for the real thing. The serious reader will probably have to return to the *Collected papers* (Erickson, 1980) to try to figure out what Erickson meant. And researchers, including those who want to get beyond clinical lore and put the enterprise of psychotherapy on a firm scientific footing, will have to turn to the laboratory to find out whether Erickson was right.

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