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Hypnosis As A Defense

by Lu Clark*

On a night in Beverly Hills ten years ago, a night so quiet you could "almost hear the sound of ice rattling in cocktail shakers in the homes way down the canyon," a crime occurred that tore the fabric of American society.

Four young people climbed over the automobile gate of a cul de sac home at 10050 Cielo Drive.

Inside the home, Sharon Tate, a month away from having a baby by her husband, movie director Roman Polanski, reclined in bed talking to Jay Sebring, a jet set men's hair stylist.

In the living room, a few feet away, were Abigail Folger, heiress to the coffee fortune, and Voytek Frykowski, a friend of Polanski from their boyhood days in Poland.

Within 15 minutes, all four were dead. Sebring was shot to death. Frykowski was shot and knifed. Sharon Tate and Abigail Folger were stabbed dozens of times. On the lower half of a white dutch door the killers painted in blood the word: "pig."

When the case finally broke in December of 1969, the identity and motives of the killers taxed the imagination. The killings had been carried out by three young women and a young man, members of a "family" under the spell of a 34-year-old, 5-foot, 2-inch ex-convict who did not attempt to dissuade his followers from their belief that he was Jesus Christ.

The grisly Sharon Tate murders focused attention on Charles Manson, described in the press as a "master hypnotist" who had cast a spell on his family of assassins. Susan Atkins, one of the defendants, testified that Manson's dominance caused her and the other members of the group to lose control of their senses. Many people found this a reasonable explanation for a bloody incident that no sane person could possibly have perpetrated. Hypnosis was again implicated as a potentially dangerous implement that could seduce people into committing crimes.

Manson's dominance of the activities of his "family" is based upon the theory that human beings are like puppets who can be manipulated by sinister hypnotic forces to execute acts of evil design. In a James Bond movie shocker based on a book by Ian Fleming, a number of beautiful women are indoctrinated under hypnosis in nefarious ways of undermining their governments. As a thrilling fantasy the movie has many merits. But as a factual account of what hypnosis is all about the idea is preposterous.

More disturbing is the fact that from time to time ominous admonitions about hypnosis are issued by a few respected members of the medical profession. For example, a reputable Danish psychiatrist, P. J. Reiter, has reported the case of a schoolteacher who was hypnotically induced to shoot himself in the arm and to engage in several criminal acts. He reported another case of a man who, during a trance, was persuaded by an unscrupulous hypnotist to rob a bank, in the course of which he killed two people.

Whether these aberrations were the result of hypnosis, however, is open to question. There are persons who are so obedient to authority that they will do whatever is asked of them, even though the acts are foreign to their nature. During war many men in combat, who have been brought up to love their fellow men, willingly engage in slaughter at the behest of society and expect to be decorated rather than punished.

Compliance with the rules and obligations of society is the norm and more or less to be expected. What is singular is that there are people who have an implicit and unswerving trust in authority. Often, a subject in hypnosis will perceive that the hypnotist wants him to perform in extraordinary ways; yet he remains certain that the hypnotist would not expose him to danger. Under these circumstances he will play-act. This is not to say that a criminally inclined person will not use the hypnotic situation as a cover to act out his lawless tendencies, and that a criminally inclined operator may not expose his subjects to real danger. But one does not need hypnosis to persuade people to carry out antisocial acts. Nevertheless, we may suspect that when a criminal act is actually carried out, other factors besides hypnosis are involved.

Not even a criminal hypnotist can induce a person to execute a misdeed if a subject is not willing to co-operate. As long as the situation is a make-believe one, the subject will seemingly go along and put on an act. But when he senses that he is being requested to do something that violently opposes his values or acutely jeopardizes his safety, he will either refuse to comply or arouse himself from the trance.

Subjects who enter into experiments realize that the doctor must be assuming responsibility for what is being done, and they go farther than they ordinarily would, but only up to a certain limit. In Dr. Ernest Hilgaard's laboratory at Stanford University in California the behavior of subjects who had been given bizarre commands in the trance state was studied. They were easily able to counteract instructions that they did not want to follow. Dr. Hilgaard noted: "Some said they deliberately did not pay attention; others said they used sheer effort or determination; and a few claimed they used autosuggestion to resist—but resist they did."

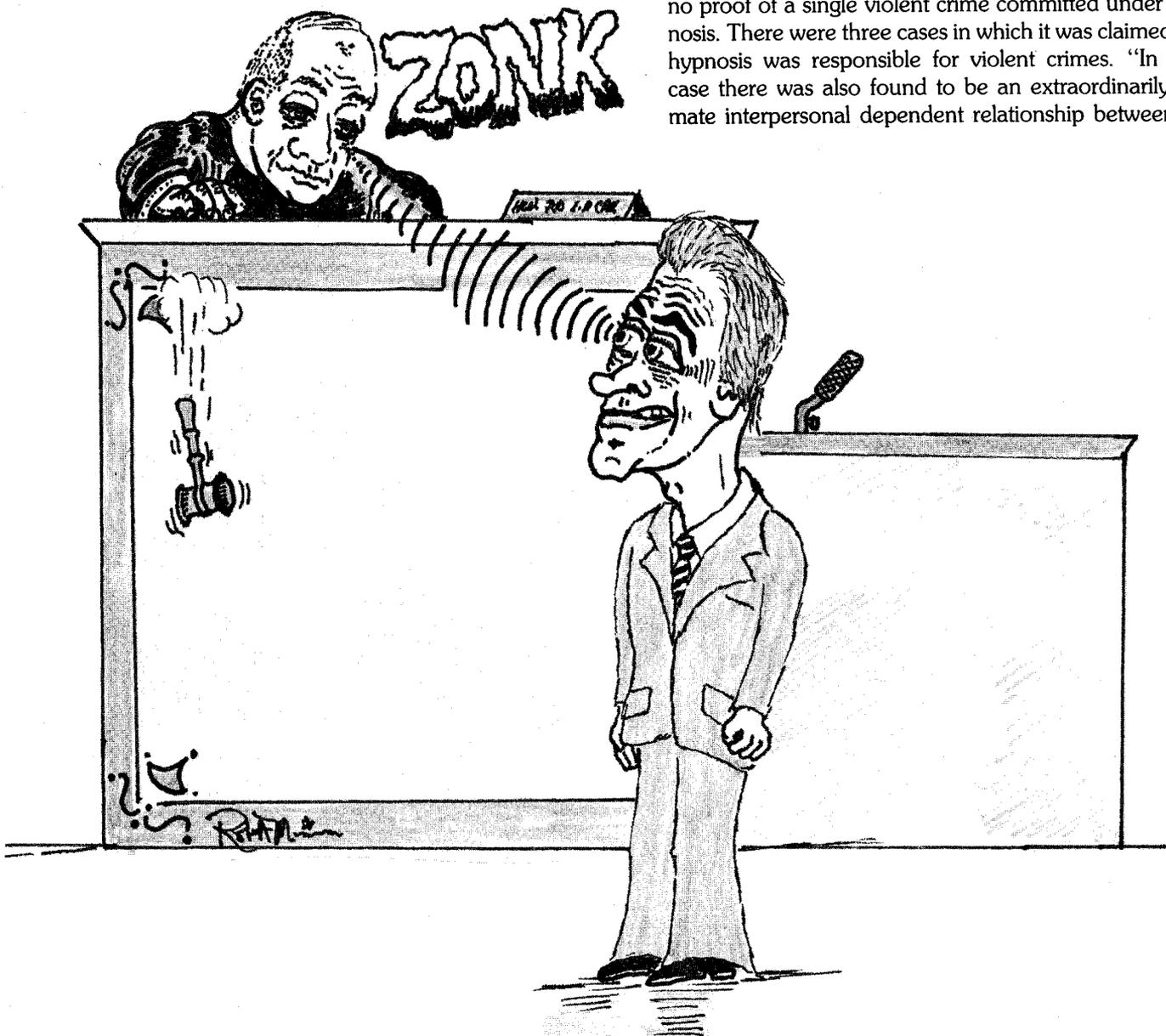
*taken from *Hypnosis: Is It For You?*
by Lewis R. Wolberg, M.D.

To the question, then, of whether it is possible for a deeply hypnotized person (one who is a somnambule and can open his eyes without coming out of a trance) to commit an antisocial act or to perpetrate such an act through posthypnotic suggestion, after the trance has ended, we may answer theoretically, "yes." But it is equally possible for that person to do something criminal or outrageous in the waking state as well. In either case, the essential ingredient is motivation. If the person harbors deep desires for wrongdoing, he will easily rationalize any situation to justify his malefaction. He will allow himself to be persuaded to break the law if his impulses are in this direction; he does not need hypnosis to prod him into this acting-out. Some alarmists, however, find it

intriguing to build up the power of hypnosis in order to picture it as an irresistible force that can convert a benign law-abiding citizen into a killer. The rash of stories that appear in the press from time to time seem to indicate exactly that. But when we examine the facts closely, we usually find that the relationship of hypnosis to the perpetrated crime is coincidental.

The majority of practitioners who have used hypnosis over a period of many years have never encountered a single subject who was harmed in any way or who could be induced to harm others in the trance state. A substantial amount of evidence has been fathered to lay to rest the idea that hypnosis can prompt a person to perform an antisocial act without his willing it.

Dr. Jacob H. Conn, of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, read widely through one hundred and fifty years of medical literature and case histories and found no proof of a single violent crime committed under hypnosis. There were three cases in which it was claimed that hypnosis was responsible for violent crimes. "In each case there was also found to be an extraordinarily intimate interpersonal dependent relationship between the



hypnotist and the subject over a long period of time, including homosexuality." On the basis of this pathological relationship each subject could have committed the crime of which he was accused without the formality of hypnosis. The fact that hypnosis had been practiced at one time or another gave the defendant a plausible-sounding alibi. "Outmoded Svengali-like theories in which the hypnotist induces a zombie-like trance in the subject who then becomes a passive, will-less tool of his master are clearly out of nineteenth-century science fiction, (with) isolated instances of mismanaged patients by incompetent operators and the few cases in which undiagnosed pre-psychotic persons were hypnotized, then committed anti-social acts . . . The facts speak for themselves. There are thousands of subjects who have been studied in laboratory settings and privately over a period of many years. Hypnosis probably has the fewest harmful or unpleasant side effects of any therapy in medicine."

The careful studies by Dr. Hilgaard and his associates also cast a great deal of doubt on the contention that a person may be induced to harm himself during hypnosis, even to the point of suicide. Such speculations are fanciful and occur largely in novels and on the stage. If a subject has a great deal of faith in the integrity of a hypnotist, he may go along with a harmful suggestion, believing that the hypnotist is setting up a situation for mere play-acting. Thus, if a hypnotist hands the subject a glass of clear fluid and says, "Drink this," the trusting subject will do so. Should the glass contain a poison, it may be lethal to the subject. But we surely can discount such an eventuality. After all, when a patient goes to a surgeon for an operation, he confidently expects that he will not have his heart cut out while he is under anesthesia.



The behavior of a subject under hypnosis can be as sensible and adaptive as in waking life. He never loses control of himself. Indeed, he may be able to refuse to comply with certain commands with an intensity not possible in the conscious state. His co-operation with the suggestions of the hypnotist are based on a mutual relationship that develops between the two. He never loses power to discriminate between right and wrong.

As a defense, then, hypnotism has been drained of its validity. A cursory look at C.J.S. indicates that the early 1900's was the last time it was used. Of much more importance today is the power of drugs to influence behavior. Hypnosis is no more and no less than an effective treatment method within the limitations that bound any good medical technique. After all, insulin is helpful in diabetes, but it offers no benefit whatsoever in other metabolic disorders. The value of hypnosis lies as a healing vehicle, as well as a research instrument, when it is used conservatively with an understanding of its limitations.

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