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Pseudo-orientation in time is a hypnotic technique pioneered by Milton Erickson and popularized significantly by Scott D. Miller and Insoo Kim Berg in their book, *The Miracle Method* (Erickson, 1954; Miller & Berg, 1995). In the literature of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), the technique appears in various forms including the Smart Outcome Generator and timeline interventions (Andreas & Andreas, 1987, 1989; Bodenhamer & Hall, 1998; Gray, 2008a, b; James & Woodsmall, 1988; Linden & Perutz, 1998; Robbins, 1986). It represents a significant addition to any clinician's toolbox and is not limited to hypnotic contexts.

### **Pseudo-orientations: the Basics**

A pseudo-orientation in time is an exercise in which the individual projects herself into a desired future for therapeutic purposes. It can be used to clarify goals and outcomes, to create motivation for change, to eliminate resistance to change and to elucidate the path to desired goals.

Erickson (1954) suggests that the power of the technique lies in its reliance on the unconscious mind's ability to create a future that incorporates the client's hopes and dreams into the structure of that future and the client's subsequent experience of change as a pre-existent fact. Erickson understood, long before there was neurophysiological evidence to prove it, that imagined events create many of the same physiological changes in the brain and body as the physical events themselves (la Fougère, et al. ,2009; Kuhtz-Buschbeck, et al., 2003; Lotze, et al.,1999; Michelon, Vettel, & Zacks, 2006; Nair, Purcott, Fuchs, Steinberg, & Kelso, 2003; Oullier, Jantzen, Steinberg, & Keiso, 2005).

As the client generates these futures, using pseudo-orientation, she inevitably incorporates into them hopes and dreams and meaningful capacities that already exist within her range of experience. The pseudo-orientation in time is used "... to create a therapy situation in which the patient could respond effectively psychologically to desired

therapeutic goals as actualities already achieved” (p. 396). This is to say that when an outcome is experienced in the imagination; a real foundation is laid for the expectation that the same outcome can be accomplished in reality.

This was done ... using, ... a technique of orientation into the future. Thus the patient was able to achieve a detached, dissociated, objective and yet subjective view of what he believed at the moment he had already accomplished, without awareness that those accomplishments were the expression in fantasy of his hopes and desires (p. 396).

The essence of the technique is the assumption that we can actively participate in the process of creating futures by accessing the creative possibilities that already dwell within us. Whether the future is envisioned as associated or dissociated, the technique provides a real time experience of something that is subjectively encountered as already complete in itself. Moreover, the client’s experience of the reality of the imagined future is dissociated from the common idea of hopes or dreams—subjective ephemera; it is experienced as a reality. This process, of awakening unconscious resources to build creative futures, was named pseudo-orientation in time (Rossi, 1986).

Erickson (1954) emphasized that the technique takes advantage, not of conscious fantasies which emerge fully formed and that can be dismissed as mere imaginings, but of unconscious desires that represent deeply held, preexisting goals and directions.

*Unconscious fantasies* ... are not accomplishments complete in themselves, nor are they apart from reality. Rather, they are psychological constructs in various degrees of formulation, for which the unconscious stands ready, or is actually awaiting an opportunity, to make a part of reality. They are not significant merely of *wishful desire* but rather of *actual intention* at the opportune time (p. 421).

The unconscious fantasies that lay at the root of the technique are not the complete, conscious dreamings that characterize everyday imaginings. They are, rather, impulses, capacities and outcomes that have not yet fully matured. They are motivational and perceptual fragments awaiting the opportunity for expression. In terms of general

systems theory, they are subsystems that lie dormant until they are incorporated into a larger emerging system. While each represents a true potential, they also need an appropriate context for realization.

Most simply, a pseudo-orientation in time consists of sending an individual into another time or frame in which the problem at hand has been solved or the desired goal has already been obtained. The positive emotional state that characterizes the outcome may be thought of as the condition that constrains and motivates the initiation of the process. It can also be understood as an expression of the deep tendencies to move towards growth and healing that dwell within each of us.

Erickson had a marked preference for allowing the unconscious to establish the priorities for change, the target for change and the specific outcome that the technique envisioned. Typically, he would allow the client to experience future resolutions in deep trance and leave them amnesic for the experience until a time when the unconscious determined that its revelation would be appropriate. In his discussion of his own experiences with self-hypnosis, Erickson indicates that he provides the unconscious with general outcomes, not presuming to direct it as to process (Erickson, 1977).

### **Other Approaches**

Pseudo-orientations can be applied in several different ways. Miller and Berg offer a basic and accessible formulation in their Book: *The Miracle Method* (1995). Here, the technique is applied by asking the client to imagine a time when their current problem had already been resolved. In Erickson's words they establish

... a detached, dissociated, objective and yet subjective view of what ..[the client] ... believed at the moment he had already accomplished, without awareness that those accomplishments were the expression in fantasy of his hopes and desires (p. 396).

Unlike Erickson's original formulations, the Miracle Method is carried out in full waking consciousness and requires the client's active participation.

Suppose tonight, after you go to bed and fall asleep, while you are sleeping

a miracle happens. The miracle is that the problem or problems that you are struggling with are solved! Just like that! Since you are sleeping, however, you don't know that the miracle has happened. You sleep right through the whole event. When you wake up tomorrow morning, what would be some of the first things that you would notice that would be different and that would tell you that the miracle had happened and that your problem is solved (p. 38)?

Another technique that makes use of the same general concept is John Overdurf's End-State Energy technique. Here, the client is invited to consider a problem state, one that seems currently insurmountable. The state is typically framed by the statement: 'If only I had [This] my life would be, or I would feel [That]'. The client is then asked to imagine how they will feel when that problem has finally been resolved. Rather than accepting a nominalized, meaningless answer, the technique requires the participant to step fully into the experience of having resolved the problem. Once they are fully associated into the positive end-state (evaluated by the therapist or coach in terms of visible physiological changes), the client is invited to bring the energy of that state back into the present and from within that state to generate a "smallest next step" that would help to bring about the desired end. That is, the client maintains the positive state while returning consciously into the present (Overdurf, 2008).

In the spirit of Erickson's original formulation, this version of the technique operates on a relatively unconscious level. It depends upon the affective experience of being there, of having it done, to drive the behaviors that will lead to full fruition. Overdurf suggests that by coming into the experience of the end-state, the client is empowered to work through the process of achieving the outcome.

More classically, the NLP technique sometimes referred to as the smart outcome generator uses the same underlying technique, allying the conscious with the unconscious to motivate the full realization of a well formed and imaginably experienced outcome. In doing so, it makes use of the well-formedness conditions for outcomes.

The idea of well-formedness conditions for goals or outcomes is a central pillar of Neuro-Linguistic Programming interventions. It developed more or less directly from the

work of Noam Chomsky. Just as Chomsky held that native speakers of any language can intuitively identify whether a communication is syntactically well-formed or meaningful, so, human behaviors require certain kinds of ordered structures to make them meaningful, motivating or efficacious. Typically these conditions specify the formal elements of the behavior in a defined sequence. While Chomsky's concept was specifically about language, NLP extended the idea of well-formedness conditions to behavior (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Dilts, 1981; Dilts, & Delozier, 1990; O'Connor & Seymour, 1990; Linden & Perutz, 1998; Dilts, Delozier, & Delozier, 2000; Gray, 2008a, 2008b).

At their most basic level, the NLP well-formedness conditions for any given outcome specify that:

1. The outcome must be stated as a positive thing or experience; something wanted, not something unwanted or to be ended.
2. The outcome must be something that is under the goal seeker's personal control. This also implies that the task should not be stated too broadly.
3. The outcome must be specified in terms of sensory experience; it must be described in terms of what can be seen, heard, felt, tasted or smelled—how you will know you have it when you get it.
4. The outcome should be evaluated for ecology; what it will change in the person's life and the lives around them.
5. The outcome should be imagined and experienced in fantasy as fully as possible.

A final step, emphasized by Bandler and others, includes taking a perspective starting from the imagined future and noting the steps, in reverse order, that allowed the client to get there. These steps are then reviewed from future to the present and again, from the present into the future and finally committed to writing (Andreas & Andreas, 1989; Bandler, 1999; Bodenhamer & Hall, 1988; Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993; Dilts, 1981; Dilts, Delozier & Delozier, 2000; Gray, 2008a, 2008b; Linden & Perutz, 1998; Miller & Berg, 1996).

It should be noted that, for the most part, these characteristics are typical of deep, intrinsic motives. Intrinsic motivators are desired positively (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Gray, 2005, 2008a). They are characterized by choice and personal autonomy; they often

include strong self efficacy beliefs (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Deci & Ryan 2008; Hulleman et al., 2008; Koestner, 2008; Notz, 1975). Because they are often rooted in previous or vicarious experiences, they can be specified in sensory terms (often with special emphasis on kinesthetic elements—this is how I will feel) (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). Well-formedness conditions can often be used to differentiate between extrinsic outcomes with relatively superficial motivations and intrinsic motivations which provide stronger sensory and motivational cues.

During 1992, the author was teaching psychology at a local Community College. As part of a lesson on motivation, he asked students to apply the NLP well-formedness criteria to outcomes that they had already set for themselves. An important facet of the exercise was the imaginal experience of the anticipated outcome. That is, after specifying a positive outcome, after determining that the outcome was under their personal control and specifying several means by which the student would know that they had attained the desired state or position, they were asked to imagine stepping into the end state and trying it on.

On this occasion there was a young woman in the class who had been working towards a degree in nursing. She had just begun the program and had no idea of what it was that a nurse actually did. When she tried on the imagined experience of the day-to-day realities of nursing, she came rather quickly to the realization that it was not something that she wanted to do. She changed her major soon thereafter.

### **Presuppositions**

The use of pseudo-orientations presupposes several things 1) The client already possesses the skills or abilities (resources) necessary to reach those goals--These are Erickson's unconscious fantasies. 2) Motivation is often established most powerfully from positive goals—things that are wanted and can be actively imagined. 3) Imagined results can have the impact of actual experience. 4) Problems are generally not maintained in the same manner in which they were established. 5) Given the opportunity, clients will create meaningful futures rooted in their own capacities.

### **Resources.**

A pseudo-orientation in time assumes that each individual has within herself resources that are sufficient to solve the problem at hand or to attain the goal sought. That

these resources are not always apparent to the conscious mind is more often the problem than any presenting pathology.

Resources may be thought of as any experience or any memory of an experience that the individual has had. They are as likely to be imagined experiences or role plays as actual experiences. The idea that people possess these kinds of resources was central to Erickson's approach and forms one of the basic presuppositions of NLP (Andreas, 1989; Bodenhamer & Hall, 1998; Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Dilts, Delozier Bandler & Grinder, 1980; Haley, 1973; James & Woodsmall, 1988; Linden, 1997; Robbins, 1983).

Erickson (n.d.) reflects the basic understanding of resources in the following passage:

*Hypnosis is not some mystical procedure, but rather a systematic utilization of experiential learnings -that is, the extensive learnings acquired through the process of living itself.... For example, mention may be made of hypnotic anesthesia or hypnotic amnesia, but these are no more than learnings of everyday living organized in an orderly, controlled and directed fashion. For example, nearly everyone has had the experience of losing a painful headache during a suspense movie without medication of any sort. Similarly, everyone has developed an anesthesia for the sensation of shoes on the feet, glasses on the face, and a collar around the neck.... (p. 1325).*

Every individual has a tremendous number of these generally unrecognized psychological and somatic learnings and conditionings, and it is the intelligent use of these that constitutes an effectual use of hypnosis. (Erickson & Rossi, p. 224).

It is important to consider that Erickson's techniques included a heavy positive reliance on the capacities of the unconscious. In his own experiments with autohypnosis, his preferred method was to set forth an intention and allow the unconscious, with little in the way of verbal or conscious guidance, to bring it into realization. Similarly, in pseudo-orientations in time, by relaxing away from conscious control, the unconscious is freed to discover not only the resources that are available but also the most efficient way to use

them.

Often the resource remains unrecognized on a conscious level until the pseudo-orientation creates a specific resonance with it. Thus, in *The Miracle Method*, having led the client to imagine that the miracle has occurred, Miller and Berg ask the client to think of experiences of behaviors that occurred before they were patients that made them feel similarly. “Can you think of a time when you felt this way or acted this way before?” The examples of healthy behavior from before the problem are then analyzed in terms of when, where and with whom the events occurred. Exceptions to the problem behavior are used as examples of resourceful behaviors that assist the client as he creates the miracle in present time.

Central to the solution-focused approach is the certitude that, in a person’s life, there are invariably exceptions to the behaviors, ideas, and interactions that are, or can be, associated with the problem. There are times when a difficult adolescent is *not* defiant, when a depressed person feels *less* sad, when a shy person is *able* to socialize, when an obsessive person is *able* to relax, when a troubled couple *resolves* rather than escalates conflict, when a bulimic *resists* the urge to binge, when a child does *not* have a tantrum when asked to go to bed, when an overresponsible person *says* no, when a problem drinker *does* contain their drinking to within a sensible limit, etc. ( Cade & O’Hanlon, 1993, p. 96).

A set of resources may also be identified from the perspective of the future resource state. Once the client is experiencing the future-solution state, they can think back to experiences in their life that made this possible. That is, from that place in the future, they can think back to times that are now particularly relevant to the solution. They might ask themselves to think of five pretreatment experiences that were crucial to making this future resolution possible.

The author often uses pseudo-orientations to design strategies and to adjust his own behavior from the point of view of a more expert and accomplished future. One of his favorite practices in this alternate future is to remember a list of past memories that were crucial in forming the attitudes and abilities that made this future possible. In a

practical setting one might ask the client:

*Now that you have attained this outcome, and find yourself enjoying these feelings, think back over your life, back to a time, a time, perhaps, before we met, when you experienced feelings that have now become important in allowing this new reality to come into being. Think back, in a comfortable and relaxed way, in the same way that you would remember a pleasant trip, or a good book, and remember, really remember, a few experiences that set the stage for these present, pleasant feelings of resolution and completion.*

From this vantage point, the technique uses the phenomenon of state dependant memory to revivify resource states that are foundational to the experience of the solution.

State dependant memory generally refers to the tendency to more accurately remember events that occurred in physiological conditions that are more or less similar to the current state of the organism. Thus, drunks, while they are drinking, are more likely to remember things learned while drunk, happy people are more likely to remember happy times, depressed persons are more likely to remember being depressed. By the same token, depressed persons find it difficult to remember being happy, addicts find it difficult to remember managing without drugs and happy people tend to forget that they were sad or depressed. Erickson and Rossi suggest that post-hypnotic and traumatic amnesias are just such state dependant effects. Individual states of mind/body dependant upon the level of cortisol and other stress related substances have a similar effect. When we are stressed we tend to remember stressful events (Rossi, 1986; Rossi & Cheek, 1988).

State dependant memory is described by Rossi as a form of memory that is more diffuse than either classical or operant conditioning. It is a function of the state of the body with regard to hormonal flux and neuro-modulators. It provides the physiological context that frames other kinds of learning (Rossi, 1986).

Pseudo-orientations in time take advantage of this phenomenon. By fully associating into a future characterized by experiences of fulfillment, empowerment or change, the client becomes more ready to access resources that will support those future behaviors that are consistent with the imagined outcome. In general, active participation

in a fantasy of the empowered future creates a physiological state that increases the probability that the participant will remember resources, exceptions to the problem and breakthroughs that are consistent with the desired future.

### **Motivation.**

Pseudo-orientations in time have the advantage of enhancing motivation to change on several levels. Motivation is often inhibited when we face unknown or unfamiliar tasks. By previewing the future in a full sensory representation, we remove some of the threatening aspects of the unknown. Further, by having the experience of final success in the imagined enterprise, the fear of failure can be partially disarmed. In many ways, the simple, imaginative role-play involved in the pseudo-orientation constitutes a desensitization of fear of failure in that specific context (Scheele, 1998; Wolpe, 1958; 1982; Schaeffer & Martin, 1969).

This is part of the utility of Erickson's design. As originally discussed with Rossi, it was very important that the orientation be accomplished in dissociated mode. It was observed through the mechanism of a crystal ball as if it were an objective event viewed from a distance. He explained that this allowed the client to have an experience of what that outcome would be like without the difficulties engendered by the actual experience of the target state. In his view it became a specific experience of practicing the task from a distance. Thus it is a... "detached, dissociated, objective and yet subjective view of what he believed at the moment he had already accomplished, without awareness that those accomplishments were the expression in fantasy of his hopes and desires" (1954, p. 396).

Motivation is further enhanced by ensuring that the future goal is linked to the needs and desires of the client. Too many false starts are the result of wrong motivation. In harmony with the wisdom of the literature of motivation, the goal must be something that the client wants. It cannot be done to satisfy others or to meet external demands. It must come from within; intrinsic motivation is crucial (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993; Deci & Ryan 2008; Hulleman et al., 2008; Koestner, 2008; Miller & Berg, 1995; Notz, 1975; Rossi, 1986).

Once again, Erickson's original formulation requires that the imagined future be a

reflection of an unconscious direction, a nascent personal direction that already awaits fulfillment; not some unrealistic fantasy. To this end, he went to great pains to ensure that the future was rooted in unconscious directions and that its fulfillment was not subject to conscious direction (1980). In one of its forms, as the whole life reframe, pseudo-orientation in time may align with Maslowian ideas of self-actualization and Jungian notions of calling (Gray, 2008a, 2008b; Hillman, 1996).

One use of the technique, in order to ensure intrinsic motivation, begins with leading the client to focus on their own inner directions. Here, the technique is rooted in the present-time experience of a centered, content-free, positive experience, usually of self-esteem or self efficacy. Having established the state, the client is then asked to imagine a future associated with that state and the well-formedness conditions are applied to the fantasy. This provides a certain guarantee that the outcome specified will be neither superficial nor aimed at an outer audience. Insofar as the root resource represents a genuine revivification of deep personal resources, clients will tend to produce personally meaningful outcomes.

In an alternate application, as used with the Community College student above, the process requires the client to assess an outcome using the well-formedness conditions and to determine whether or not the outcome is appropriate for them. It becomes in fact, an evaluative engine which often has the effect of inspiring the client to seek out an alternate goal or outcome.

### **Imagination.**

As long ago as 1933, Clark Hull held forth the idea that every imagined or observed action was accompanied by minute motoric responses that imitated the imagined motion in a precise manner. Bandura's (1997) work with modeling and social learning strongly suggests the same mechanism. That same mechanism has been confirmed on the level of neural structure with fMRI studies. Recent fMRI studies of the human brain reflect the fact that imagined activities activate many of the same loci as the actual performance of the physical activity (la Fougère, et al., 2009; Kuhtz-Buschbeck, et al., 2003; Lotze, et al., 1999; Michelon, Vettel, & Zacks, 2006; Nair, Purcott, Fuchs,

Steinberg, & Kelso, 2003; Oullier, Jantzen, Steinberg, & Keiso, 2005).

As Erickson knew, imagined practice bears results in practical experience.

### **Creating meaningful futures.**

One of the central presuppositions of the technique is that every person has a unique set of gifts and abilities which define their place and function in the world. Using a biological metaphor one might say that there is a human ecology and each of us is prepared for a specific niche in the world.

From a Depth Psychological dimension we may imagine along with Jung that every person is drawn by the archetype of the Self to the manifestation of an inborn but for the most part unconscious potential. Within each of us this potential for self realization acts as a direction and a call to something more (Hillman, 1996; Jung, 1966)

These formulations imply that, all else being equal, the unconscious tends to move towards a maximization of potential: the best life possible under the circumstances. By assembling the available resources in line with this developmental path, the change agent can take advantage of the internal impulse towards growth and self realization.

In some cases, despite the presumption of this positive intent, people do get stuck in patterns that are no longer truly useful. This is the genesis of many of the continuing problems encountered in therapeutic settings. Nevertheless, Erickson, the NLP community, and the Humanistic and Solution-Focused communities have a specific faith in the unconscious' innate tendency to move towards a goal of complete manifestation of individual potential.

### **Problem maintenance.**

It is a by now a truism in the worlds of NLP and solution focused treatment that problems are not maintained by the same behavioral structures that gave them birth. Problems are more often than not continuing answers to very different problems than those that they originally served. By turning to future solutions and currently available resources, significant progress can be made in a short time (Grinder & Bandler, 1976,

1975a, 1979, 1982; Andreas & Andreas, 1987, 1989; DeShazer, 1994; Miller & Berg, 1995; Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993).

Haley (1973) notes: " ... Erickson puts a primary emphasis upon shifting them towards success in work and love. He does not usually review their past with them, nor does he help them to understand why they have problems" (p. 86).

## **Discussion**

In a casual conversation with the operator of a local business, the author was advised that her business had become stalled at what she had always considered an intermediate stage. For some reason she was unable to commit to the changes necessary to transform her scents and soaps shop into the spa that she had envisioned. The author suggested that she take some time to herself and begin to imagine what it would feel like to have completed the work necessary and to have the fully functioning spa open and turning a profit. Once she was able to envision that and to access the feelings that would accompany it, she was to find the steps backward and to discover the chores necessary for getting from there to here. A week later, she reported that she had experienced a new excitement about the project and had begun to clear the space necessary for the realization of the Spa. Three years further on she has purchased the building next door and continues to make significant progress towards realizing her dream.

For many, the smart outcome generator has provided a logical connection between present activities and future possibilities. This of course is a crucial marker in change work of any kind. Prochaska makes the crucial point that most of the successful change observed when applying the Stages of Change model is predicted by the development of a future goal that is more valuable to the client than the loss of the problem behavior (Prochaska, 1994; Prochaska, Norcross & DiClemente, 1994).

Another advantage of pseudo-orientations is their capacity to bypass conscious objections to the possibility of the anticipated future (They are, after all, *only* imagined). Further, because when done correctly, pseudo-orientations tend to align purpose with the deeper intentions of the archetypal Self; they tend to produce powerful self-motivating

states.

Pseudo-orientation in time provides a powerful tool for awakening change through the experience of believable, relevant futures. It can serve to provide meaning, motivation and purpose by organizing resources for the realization of nascent possibilities that represent the deepest desire of the human heart.

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