Hypnosis as performance autoethnography in qualitative sociological research

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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to introduce to sociologists the concept of dissociative hypnosis and to demonstrate the potential that this discipline has for obtaining or deriving biographical narratives in ethnographic and autoethnographic studies.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper presents brief comparative histories of the development of hypnosis and of performance autoethnography to highlight the degree of consonance between these apparently, disparate modalities, in their struggle for acceptance and respectability. The intensely introspective, emotional and experiential nature of hypnosis and self-hypnosis narratives is then compared with the personal descriptions and applications of the autoethnographic process as depicted in the sociological literature, to illustrate the parallels between the two modalities. The paper concludes with a review of the potential problems and limitations inherent in using hypnosis as a memory recall modality in sociological research studies.

Findings

This paper argues that the exploratory and revelatory nature of information accrual during dissociative altered-state hypnosis closely resembles that during performance autoethnography, and that hypnosis could therefore be usefully employed as an additional and novel (ethno-) autobiographical tool in sociological and ethnographic research.

Originality/value

Performative autoethnography has now become a firmly established route to obtaining a valid and intensely personal autobiographical history of individuals or groups of individuals. However this is the first publication to propose hypnosis as an alternative approach to deriving ethnographic and autoethnographic biographical narratives.

Keywords:

[Childhood](https://www.emerald.com/insight/search?q=Childhood), [Autoethnography](https://www.emerald.com/insight/search?q=Autoethnography), [Life history](https://www.emerald.com/insight/search?q=Life+history), [Hypnosis](https://www.emerald.com/insight/search?q=Hypnosis), [Subconscious](https://www.emerald.com/insight/search?q=Subconscious)

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Introduction

The modern history of hypnosis began as the controversial, contentious even disreputable theory of an universal life force proposed by the charismatic 18th century German clinician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815)[[1]](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "fn001" \o "). In his famed book of 1779, “*Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal*”, Mesmer sets out his theory of an all-pervading fluid which could be used to explain the restoration of physical and emotional well-being in otherwise incurable patients in response to his innovative and alternative medical therapy ([Mesmer, 1779](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref054); [Wyckoff, 1975](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref081); [Tatar, 1978](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref066)). It was the British surgeon James Braid (1795–1860) who has been credited with inventing the word “hypnosis” to describe his own use of Mesmer's new therapy as a non-mystical treatment for managing nervous disorders, this because of its similarity to the sleeping state ([Braid, 1843](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref009)). Braid's terminology quickly caught on and Mesmer's description of a “life-force” gradually went out of fashion ([Wyckoff, 1975](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref081)).

Clinical hypnosis came of age in the 20th century, in the United States especially, where university courses were set up in medical hypnosis at the University of Wisconsin led by Joseph Jastrow (1863–1944) and Clark Hull (1884–1952). During this time the innovative work of Milton Erickson (1901–1980) in the USA and John Hartland (1901–1977) in the UK were of major significance in re-establishing the therapeutic credentials which now could be seen to underpin the use of hypnosis in the 21st century ([Lankton, 2013](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref051" \o "); [Weisberg, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref079)). Hypnosis has now become established as a valid topic of research among physicians, physiologists, neurologists, psychologists, sociologists and educationalists, and as a motivational tool for use in sport, dance, drama and many other areas. ([Guilloux, 2008](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref040" \o "); [Brann *et al.*, 2012](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref010); [Entwistle, 2016](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref023), [2017](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref024); [Kluft, 2018](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref049" \o ")).

Over the same period, but in the entirely different discipline of anthropology, new paradigms of ethnography and autoethnography were being developed. These became important, if at times equally contentious, modalities in qualitative sociological research ([Sparkes, 2018](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref062" \o ")). Like hypnosis, their establishment as validated and respected sociological research idioms has not been an easy process with these disciplines having many critics and detractors, as they became much removed from their original anthropological roots. The most recent of the post-modernist/post structural variants on this participant observational approach to deriving biographies of individuals and groups, is that of *performance auto*ethnography. Such performances can be in the form of drama or dance, video or film, or as a piece of artwork or sculpture, but all entail the telling of a personal story in an experiential or embodied form, either by or through the participant ([Alexander, 2005](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref002); [Hamera, 2011](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref041" \o ")).

Although still struggling at times to find an authoritative voice and a general acceptance in *academe* ([Sparkes,2018](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref062)), autoethnography has nevertheless come to constitute an essential part of the toolbox of sociological researchers and is widely utilised by critical theorists working in the political, gender, disability and other minority arenas. It is also being employed increasingly and powerfully in understanding and highlighting the interpersonal and organisational dynamics within higher education establishments, companies and social groups ([Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref017" \o "); [Sambrook and Herrmann, 2018](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref059" \o ")), as well as becoming a valid route to obtaining a Ph.D. ([Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref017" \o ")).

The wide potential of autoethnographic writing allows for open and non-judgmental discussions about sensitive topics such as sexuality, menopausal taboos, abusive relationships and depression, emanating from within a wide range of environments including hospital wards, factories, shops, schools and colleges, as was demonstrated in a recent special issue of the Journal of Organizational Ethnography ([Sambrook and Herrmann, 2018](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref059" \o ")). As [Doloriert and Sambrook (2012)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref017" \o ") have previously discussed, the biographical narratives obtained through autoethnography, whether they be predominantly analytical interpretations ([Anderson, 2006](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref004); [Ellis and Bochner, 2006](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref021); [Chang, 2016](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref096)) or a more emotional and evocative portrayals ([Ellis, 1999](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref020); [Turner, 2013](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref071); [Bochner and Ellis, 2016](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref008" \o "); [Sparkes, 2018](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref062" \o ")), can provide valuable epistemological insight into personal or group experience and behaviour.

It is this experiential “reliving and performing” of a personal narrative, leading to illumination of an organisational, social or culturally significant area of research, which the author feels most powerfully chimes with hypnotic self-analysis. Through its facility to enable exploration and exposition of the personal experience of an individual, dissociative hypnosis can function as a valid and effective sociological research tool that can enable access to the subconscious world, the inner ethnography, of an individual. It is against the above ethnographical milieu therefore that hypnosis needs to be assessed, if it is to be accredited as a valid sociological tool, such that the recounting of a regression “state” hypnosis stream of (sub)consciousness is to be seen as a piece of performance autoethnography.

Practical aspects of using hypnosis as a sociological tool

Two complementary theories are generally advanced to explain what hypnosis is and how it can be used, and these are referred to as the sociocognitive or “non-state” theory, and the dissociative or “state” theory. The former theory treats hypnosis merely as means of inducing a relaxed, semi-aware state in order that some pre-agreed motivational instructions can be delivered to the subject in order to achieve a corresponding behavioural change or therapeutic (or entertainment!) benefit.

By contrast the dissociative or “state” theory sees there as being two relatively separate parts of the mind, a *conscious* part to which the individual has routine access and control over, and an *unconscious* (or *subconscious*) part which under normal circumstances is not amenable to easy conscious access ([Woody and Sadler, 2008](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref080)). The “state” theory posits that during an hypnotic trance state, and under a limited number of other situations known as “waking hypnosis”, hypnosis facilitates an easier and more immediate access by the conscious mind to the unconscious part of the mind. At such times, information transfer between the conscious and the unconscious parts of the mind allows memories and information about past emotional events and traumas to be more easily recalled to conscious awareness, and their current impact be recognise.

The “state” theory therefore premises that the *unconscious* mind can act as a repository and record of earlier life history, experience and accrued information and decision making, most of which the *conscious* mind has forgotten and to which it now has only limited or no current on-demand access. The purpose of this childhood and early adulthood life record in the unconscious mind is to guide and maintain the safety of the growing individual and adult by influencing from behind the scenes the adult's conscious mind and adult behaviour.

It is this process of searching for and remembering past events and feelings that this current paper suggests most appositely portrays the potential for “state” hypnosis to function as a piece of performance autoethnography. The ease with which such past information is revealed and the time scale for this revelation will vary between individuals because of variation in their ability to respond to hypnosis induction (their “hypnotisability”). This property determines to a high degree the ease with which they can go in to a trance state of sufficient depth to elicit regression and recall ([Barabasz and Barabasz, 2015](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref005" \o "); [Barnier](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref006" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref006" \o ")*[, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref006" \o "); [Frischholz, 2015](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref031" \o "); [Heap *et al.*, 2004](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref045); [Gandhi and Oakley, 2005](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref032)).

Although some volunteers will be of high hypnotisability and eminently suitable as research participants, others will be less so, and their low hypnotisability will make them unsuitable for hypnosis studies. Nonetheless the majority of adults are capable of achieving some depth of hypnosis and consequent recall of past memories and events. Preliminary screening for hypnotisability can be undertaken but the interpretation of such screening results and their predictive value is still a matter for debate ([Entwistle, 2016](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref023), [2017](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref024)).

In contrast to conventional, non-hypnotic autoethnography and other similar forms of autobiography, which can be conceived and produced entirely by the participant(s) without the involvement of an external intermediary, hypnosis (unless it is “self-hypnosis”) clearly necessitates the use of a suitably trained and qualified hypnosis practitioner experienced in facilitating dissociative hypnosis sessions. Many scientific, psychology, sociology and medical professionals now have such skills, and in the UK at least, the British Society of Clinical and Academic Hypnosis (BSCAH) can provide advice and training if appropriate. Numerous textbooks are also available discussing protocols for hypnosis induction and regression ([Gibson and Heap, 1991](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref033); [Barabasz](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref095" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref095" \o ")*[, 2011](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref095" \o "); [Brann *et al.*, 2012](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref010); [Yapko, 2015](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref083" \o "); [Elkins, 2016](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref019)).

Hypnosis might not be appropriate for all individuals, especially those suffering from psychological disorders, severe psychiatric illness or iatrogenic drug-related syndromes ([Alladin](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref003" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref003" \o ")*[, 2007](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref003" \o "); [Kradin, 2012](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref050" \o "); [Walker, 2016](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref075)). In some circumstances therefore it might be appropriate to have a medically qualified person involved at the initial screening stage ([Popescu, 2015](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref058" \o ")). The ethical issues involved in using hypnosis both in therapy and in research situations as a sociological tool, encompass much of what is also applicable to psychotherapy and counselling, implicitly if not always explicitly, and what therefore should apply also to ethnography research in general (ibid).

It is also the case that there is a wide variation between individuals in their ability to respond to hypnosis (their “hypnotisability”), and in the ease with which they can go in to a trance state of sufficient depth to elicit regression and recall ([Heap *et al.*, 2004](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref045); [Gandhi and Oakley, 2005](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref032); [Barnier](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref006" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref006" \o ")*[, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref006" \o ")). Although some volunteers will be of high hypnotisability and eminently suitable as research participants, others will be less so, and their low hypnotisability will make them unsuitable for hypnosis studies. Preliminary screening for hypnotisability can be undertaken but the interpretation of such screening results and their predictive value is still a matter for debate ([Entwistle, 2016](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref023), [2017](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref024)).

Despite the premise of this paper, there clearly are differences between the above description of the hypnotic process, and that of performance autoethnography, as considered below. These most notably relate, to the obtaining of informed consent, maintaining participants' confidentiality and empowerment, and the veracity of hypnotically elicited narratives. These important aspects will be discussed later in this paper.

Hypnosis as performance autoethnography

Regression during dissociative, altered state hypnosis can facilitate and encourage the subjective revisiting and recalling of past events, traumas and feelings. The resulting free-flowing narrative, verbalised during or immediately after hypnosis is usually accompanied by the emotional re-experiencing of these recalled past times and events, and frequently by the relevant physical sensations of being back in the individual's past. This emerges as a very personal piece of psychosocial autobiography, an exposition of a particular event or period of time in an individual's life, evoked and subsequently recounted and *performed* in the first-person voice by the owner of that narrative. This is what is suggested most closely resembles an autoethnographic performance. In performing this narrative the reciter of the story is able to bring into focus their past history to be viewed through the lens of their own and others' contemporary cultural and societal standards and mores.

In his discussion of the cross-cultural role of performance ethnography, Alexander ([2005](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref002), p. 434) refers to the action of “*stepping into someone else*'*s voice* [original author's emphasis] and consequently his or her lived experience”. In hypnotic regression the adult in hypnosis, steps into the voice of his or her younger or child self, and the resulting dialogue between conscious and unconscious minds generates a *reportage* about earlier life experiences. The hypnotic subject describes and performs his or her own lived experience, as it feels/felt and is/was experienced, in a manner that closely resembles classical performance autoethnography. For the individual such past experience has become part of the structural interrelationship between the mind and the body, the subconscious and the conscious, constituting the “storied bodies and storied selves” described by [Sparkes (1999)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref061" \o "). This in turn becomes the emotional background determining that individual's present and future behaviour.

Although there are clearly differences between hypnotically elicited revelations and more conventional “awake” autoethnography there are also many similarities. Both can evoke for the subject a journey into his or her (recent or childhood) past life, a journey in which conscious expectation, simple remembering and reminiscence, gradually becomes regression, re-experience and new understanding. This discovering and re-discovering of the past with its hidden nuances and previously hidden agendas and imperatives effectively generates a similar and informative free-flowing stream of consciousness whether it is being done as hypnotic regression or as a piece of “conventional” autoethnography. To the degree that hypnosis is a profoundly personal and *emic* exploration aimed at understanding human conduct and culture set against time and relationships, it closely resembles autoethnography in being an embodied practice, what [Conquergood (1991)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref014" \o ") refers to as an “extremely sensuous way of knowing” which “privileges the body as a site of knowing” (p.180).Particularly so for [Ellis (1999)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref020) when she talks about “[paying] attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions” as this describes the classical means of inducing the hypnotic state ([Erickson, 1980](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref027)).

The autoethnographic process precisely describes the manner in which *hypnotically* evinced narratives are generated and accrued. Initially, this is as an “Alice in Wonderland” *mélange* of memories, reminiscence, pictures and feelings, which can appear during a single hypnosis session or over a series of such sessions. Fragments of memory will often appear out of any temporal order and context, but gradually build into a story of a significant time, event or personal journey in a manner analogous to the autoethnographic journey described by Grant *et al.* ([2013](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref035), p. 2). During hypnosis these feelings and images appear and re-appear without prompting and gradually build to give an internally cohesive and persuasive sense of veracity that usually comes as a total surprise to the individual hypnotic subject. This conscious revelation of unconsciously stored traumatic or emotional episodes and events is often presaged by the hypnotised person experiencing emotional *feelings* or physical *sensations*, before the full memory of the *facts* of the event are recalled, sometimes only in a later session. ([Entwistle, 1988](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref022), [2016](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref023); [Entwistle and Turner, 1986](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref025)).

Nonetheless, if hypnosis is to become accepted as a form of autoethnography within the wider sociological community, autoethnographic narratives evinced through hypnosis need to be able to fulfil as many as possible of the other criteria and qualities, seen as essential, by ethnographers such as [Tracey (2010)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref070), [Holman Jones *et al.* (2013)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref047), [Grant *et al.* (2013)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref035), and [Chang (2016)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref096). Many of these criteria clearly depend upon the specific purpose and content of the recalled narratives, and not all hypnosis rememberings will have (or be designed to have) such wide sociological value or relevance. Many such hypnotically induced recollections will therefore be predominantly autobiographical rather than autoethnographic.

However even with these purely personal recollections, many will demonstrate much of the emotional requirement for sincerity, credibility, resonance and high emotional charge regarded as prerequisites for autoethnography. Such emotional content is regularly and powerfully evident in the narratives performed and portrayed by many individuals during and immediately after undergoing a regression hypnosis session. In every respect these are demonstrably emotional and embodied performances that differ markedly from what would be evinced during conventional and alert question and answer interviews or questionnaires.

As a result, hypnosis is able to generate a subjective and very personal response which amply fulfils the definition of “highly charged accounts that thump the reader firmly in the solar plexus leaving them metaphorically gasping for breath” described by Grant *et al.* ([2013](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref035), p. 2). It is the contention of this paper therefore that dissociative “state or regressive” hypnosis could become a very valuable tool for sociological exploration – and that it is every bit as much a piece of performance autoethnography, as is classical performance autoethnography a form of awake self-hypnosis ([Alarcón and Capafons, 2006](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref001" \o "); [Wark, 2011](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref076" \o "), [2015](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref077); [Crabtree, 2012](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref015)).

Confidentiality and the obtaining of informed consent in hypnosis

When seeking to obtain informed consent from sociological research participants for a project using hypnosis, it is important to ensure that these participants fully understand the principle of using hypnosis in autoethnographic studies, and know what to expect during an hypnotic session. This includes addressing the many and common reservations, misconceptions and misinformation that individuals can have about hypnosis ([Capafons](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref012" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref012" \o ")*[, 2008](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref012" \o "); [Meyerson, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref055); [Entwistle, 2017](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref024)). Participants need to feel reassured that at all times they will remain safe and in control, and that even when very deeply into hypnosis their unconscious mind will remain around to monitor what is happening in the room during the hypnosis session. They will therefore be able, if necessary, to “awaken” of their own accord in the event of an emergency ([Gibson and Heap, 1991](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref033); [Brann *et al.*, 2012](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref010)).

The importance of participants in hypnosis led research projects understanding that they are not being “taken over” by the hypnotist but are collaborating in a mutually agreed and consenting process in which the hypnotic subject or participant is being invited to explore, discover and acquire better self-knowledge, has been emphasised by [Yapko (2014)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref082" \o ") and [Spiegel (2014)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref064). [Yapko (2014)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref082" \o ") describes this perspective in his classic paper “The spirit of hypnosis: Doing hypnosis versus being hypnotic”. This is the one which is most likely to engender a sense of empowerment in hypnosis subjects, and one which can be invaluable when recruiting hypnosis participants for sociological research programs and when seeking university ethics approval.

The inherent nature of hypnotherapy is such that there is no way of predicting what ultimately may be revealed to participants about their past, forgotten events and relationships as a result of their hypnosis sessions, which is very much the case also in standard ethnographic research within emotional and contentious areas of study. For this reason, consent given at the start of any project has to be a “rolling” process entailing constant review of accruing information and revelations session by session, with a clear understanding about the freedom of the participant to withdraw from the project at any time.

Confidentiality and anonymity of stored data and its access by researchers also assumes an even greater importance than in standard ethnography. [Tolich (2010)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref069" \o ") draws attention to the need to manage with care the confidentiality of all parties cited in ethnological outpourings, and describes his ten essential ethical guidelines needed to protect oneself and others from disclosures that might cause future harm or distress. Personal, published information whether revealed during hypnosis or through conventional autoethnography becomes part of the public domain, and remains so for some time to come; and the future implications of such revelations cannot always be fully predicted, as [Sparkes (2018)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref062" \o ") has recently highlighted.

Issues of confidentiality will vary also according to the manner in which hypnosis is being employed in the sociological arena. Self-hypnosis is entirely under the control of the researcher himself or herself, other than their perhaps undergoing some brief prior training in inducing a state of mild self-hypnosis in order to maximise its benefits. This situation is therefore identical to standard autoethnography with the resulting narrative being entirely under the researcher's own control. Where hypnosis is being undertaken by a trained hypnotist *at the request* of the researcher, to help that researcher to explore some aspect of their life or situation in greater depth than they feel possible through self-hypnosis alone, then clearly some or all of the accrued or revealed information may become known to the hypnotist (although not necessarily so). Nevertheless this information still remains entirely the property of the researcher, it may be distributed by them in in whatever way them may deem ethical or practical, and the situation is still very closely akin to conventional autoethnography.

Where a researcher is using hypnosis as an investigative tool in a sociological study, then the same privacy and ethical standards applicable to any ethnological study should be applied. This means that participants in hypnosis-driven research need to be reassured that they will retain control of their narrative and be able to veto unacceptable dissemination of *their* story if they feel this is necessary. However it is important to explain clearly to participants the sort of information that, if it became known during their hypnosis sessions, would automatically require the breaking of the bonds of confidentiality. This includes revelations about criminal or national security issues or the possibility of self-harm or harm to others especially children or young persons. This is no different from that in any ethnography or counselling situation.

Assessing the truthfulness of hypnotically evinced autobiographical narratives

A major concern for sociology researchers planning to use hypnosis as an autoecological tool is whether hypnosis is an effective and efficacious modality for facilitating a *true and accurate* recall of past events, situations and emotions. Memory retention and recall has been the subject of extensive discussion and research over many years and much still remains unclear about the psychology and neurophysiology of the hypnotic phenomenon ([Wagstaff etal](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref073" \o ")*[.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref073" \o ")*[,2008](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref073" \o "); [Thompson ***eta****l.*,2013](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref067); [Waters *etal.*, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref078);  [Thompson *et al.*, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref068); [Painter and Kring, 2015](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref056); [Grysman and Fivush, 2016](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref037" \o ")).

Despite extensive debate and research, questions remain as to the validity and veracity of the realist stories and narratives evoked as a consequence of the hypnotic process. Memory recall is always selective and not all that is known subconsciously can or will be recalled, and accurately so, simply on demand, and without concomitantly evoking *false* memories ([Patihis](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref057" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref057" \o ")*[, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref057" \o "); [Mazzoni](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref053" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref053" \o ")*[, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref053" \o ")). [Fernández (2014)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref028" \o ") has posited that we all have an innate memory distortion that protects us, by reconstructing our past rather than simply preserving it, what [Harris *et al.* (2014)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref042) refers to as an autobiographical memory. Inaccurate or incomplete recollections become attached to the original memory such that each subsequent attempt at recollection recalls an amalgam of the original (and factual) experience combined with later rememberings of this.

Furthermore there is general agreement that we modify and reconstruct our remembered past in order to create and maintain a smooth narrative of our past for social, cultural and personal reasons, as [Fernández (2014)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref028" \o ") and [Fivush and Merrill (2014)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref029" \o ") have discussed at length, often using false memories from peers and family members ([Brown *et al.*, 2015](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref011)). [Gleaves](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref034" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref034" \o ")*[(2004)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref034" \o "). [Wagstaff](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref073" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref073" \o ")*[(2008)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref073" \o ") and [Gudjonsson](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref038" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref038" \o ")*[(2014)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref038" \o ") all accept that memory recall can generate false memories and [Wagstaff](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref074" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref074" \o ")*[(2011)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref074" \o ") suggested that highly hypnotisable individuals might be more prone in this respect. The potential of hypnotic regression for evoking *false* memories of past childhood events and abuse was the subject of much contention during the 1990s and the early years of the 21st century and is one which has yet to be fully resolved ([Chu *et al.*, 1999](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref013); [Green, 1999](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref036); [Patihis](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref057" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref057" \o ")*[, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref057" \o "); [Mazzoni](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref053" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref053" \o ")*[, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref053" \o ")).

The events and emotions elicited and recalled during hypnosis are always being viewed and reported by an individual through the lens of that individual's present adult life. With all of the obfuscation and defensive mechanisms brought about by gender, culture, professional and family roles, lived experience and social media influenced adult history ([Striegel-Moore](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref065" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref065" \o ")*[, 1986](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref065" \o "); [Gubrium and Holstein, 2009](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref039" \o "); [Sparkes and Smith, 2011](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref063" \o ")). In trying to derive a measure of the validity of the autoethnographic narratives generated during hypnosis, the researcher needed to appreciate that the true and factual past childhood history of an individual may be different from their subconsciously remembered history. This in turn may be different from the history revealed to the conscious mind by the unconscious mind during their recall sessions. This last is an important filtering step as a major role of the unconscious mind is in protecting and guiding the conscious adult mind by hiding, containing and masking painful events and memories from the past and revealing only what the unconscious mind feels the conscious mind needs to know at the time, a well-recognised defence mechanism.

But might not such verisimilitude be enough, if the *raisons d*'*être* for using exploration are to understand and gain insight into the motivations and prejudices underlying our own personal behaviour, or influencing or arising from our membership of an organisation or a particular ethnic, cultural or political group? Rather than struggling to establish absolute truth, both modalities, through introspection and self-analysis, can facilitate a glimpse into the subconscious and internalised processes that underwrite our behaviour and our responses. With such understanding comes the means whereby efficacious change becomes possible for the individual or for the organisation. Hypnosis and autoethnography, it is suggested, are equally able to generate the enlightenment that can signpost for such future change.

Although it would seem that hypnosis and autoethnography both present similar troubling questions as regards their veracity and comprehensiveness, they nevertheless are both capable of eliciting autobiographical information of individuals and organisations which can provide very valuable service. The narratives evoked, recounted and performed following hypnosis therefore would appear to the author of this paper to have as much authority and conviction as do those produced during formal performance autoethnography. However, hypnosis, like autoethnography, is not for the faint hearted as such accrual and public dissemination of highly-reflexive self-knowledge necessitates a high level of risk taking regarding personal and relational disclosures. Evocative writing about oneself and about others by no means guarantees consistent public sympathy or support, and “sometimes thick skins, or their speedy growth, are helpful.” ([Grant *et al.*, 2013](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref035), p. 11).

An hypnotically evoked autoethnographic case study

The vignette, which follows, is an exemplar of how hypnosis was used to elicit an autoethnographic narrative, a personal and very emotional picture of life as a confused and unsupported teenage mother coping with her young baby, and later as a young woman dealing with an unrequited need for a second child. This is a story which would not otherwise be easily, if at all, obtainable through the use of a formal interview or questionnaire. This young woman was one of a small cohort of overweight female volunteers volunteering to undergo a series of dissociative hypnosis sessions designed to give them the opportunity to explore the aetiological impact of their traumatic childhood experiences in generating subsequent refractory adult obesity ([Entwistle *et al.*, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref026); [Entwistle, 2016](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref023), [2019](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref097)).

During her time in hypnosis this participant was able to recall, re-live, re-experience and re-enact periods in her childhood or adulthood during which emotional traumas and problems led to her becoming and remaining overweight. These troubled times where recalled and re-experienced in a manner that experientially demonstrated her original embodied, cultural, gendered and relational subjective aspects of her personal past, whilst simultaneously allowing these past times and events to be viewed objectively by her adult self ([Entwistle, 2016](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref023)).

The resulting narrative generated a reflexivity and an insight on her part about how her past teenage and later history had resulted in her current adult obesity and inability to lose weight as an adult. They also illuminated the damaging impact of attitudes and social mores of 20–30 years ago surrounding food and eating habits. Much of this long forgotten information and its relevance to her present life would have likely remained unrecognised, were it not for the introspective facility of her hypnosis sessions, and hence the information accrued differed markedly from the simple autobiography narratives that which would have been elicited through conventional sociological interviewing. Hypnosis has the ability to evince such epiphanies and reveal the ways in which individuals can negotiate “intense situations … and effects that linger - recollections, memories, images, feelings - long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished” ([Bochner, 1984](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref007" \o "), p. 595).

Childhood traumas leading to adult obesity

At the time of entering this study, the participant was 36 years of age, unmarried with an adult son, and had a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 36. She had been overweight since her mid-teens and had always felt very frustrated and guilty at having failed to lose weight in repeated commercial and self-directed weight management programmes over the previous 15 years - despite always feeling very committed to these programmes, and to her need to lose weight for health reasons. She had read the literature provided for the study and understood that this was not simply *another weight loss* study but rather was one designed to help her explore *why* it was that she could never seem to achieve and maintain weight loss.

Over a series of hypnosis sessions she was encouraged to “go back to times and places, people and events, feelings and emotions, which are in some way connected with your present weight problem”. In response to this she started to find herself repeatedly remembering, re-living and re-experiencing episodes from her mid-teens, when she was a young mother. Lacking any proper advice about how to feed her young son, her partner and herself, the only information she had to guide her was that babies were meant to put on weight and that husbands needed to be given large filling (i.e. fattening) meals. She frequently became very distressed and tearful whilst in hypnosis, as she remembered and relived how - “I didn't know what to give him [her son] because I couldn't cook. He would not eat and I'd stress out over it. I felt so guilty that I didn't know how to feed him, and that I wasn't feeding him properly”. As a result, she was “panicked into choosing cheap, sugary, easy foods, for my baby and myself and him”.

As she revisited these times in hypnosis she felt once again the confusion and guilt of not knowing how to feed her family properly. But then “I remember I started cooking and eating and obviously to make him happy”, and she remembered also feeling so proud of her little family as she watched all three of them steadily putting on weight thanks to her (inappropriate) feeding of them. She realised later in hypnosis that this was why she felt “felt panicky” when she thought about limiting her food intake, as it felt like she was abandoning her role as a good mother.

Sadly the relationship with her partner did not last - “I said I was putting weight on, and he said don't worry I'll never leave you even if you go fat. And I did and he left me. And I thought maybe that's why I don't want to lose it [the weight] because I don't want to be hurt again. I don't know - that's what I thought actually in my head.” This was the second theme to reappear in her autoethnography, as she revisited those past, difficult years - “Maybe I stay like that so I can hide behind … I keep fat then I keep hiding away, 'cause I don't want to go out. … Maybe, maybe I stay fat because I don't want to meet someone… my weight is just a barrier to keep people away. And maybe that's my way now of just…because of the way I feel I can't be in a relationship. I just can't do that so I keep the weight on to keep people away from me”.

Towards the end of her hypnosis sessions a third theme appeared, to her great surprise. In her penultimate session she suddenly realised that - “I always wanted another baby. But I always thought, I don't want a baby because I might kill the baby, I might suffocate the baby.” (this because she had a difficult history of panic attacks). Then in what was planned to be her final session, she opened her eyes quite suddenly, in surprise, and said that a thought had just come into her head that she felt almost too foolish and too embarrassed to admit.

“Maybe, having a big belly is like a comfort. I don't know, that's just the thing that was playing on my mind. Like the comfort and wanting another baby … 'it's strange … but it feels like, it feels, like … it's given me a thought … the past two weeks”…I like that feeling of … feeling, pregnant. I've always wanted to be pregnant again. Sometimes when I've been lying in bed and I've gone oh! I feel like I've overeaten, it's like I've got a baby”… But it's been like a comfort thing, as well, I kinda imagine if I was pregnant … And it's made me feel happy.”

This was the first time that this participant had suspected (or admitted to herself), that being overweight could be providing her with the experiential sense of being pregnant again, and that sensually, visibly and socially, being a fat woman with a large “belly” was in many ways analogous to being a pregnant one. She blushed as she admitted that liked it when strangers assumed that she was pregnant and gave up their seat on the bus for her. Feeling and looking fat was satisfying her need to be pregnant again, as she could take pleasure and comfort in re-experiencing the feel and appearance of having a fat (ie “pregnant”) abdomen, without any of the risks inherent in having to find a new partner first, one who might then leave her, as did her first partner.

This was the story that was gradually evoked during this young woman's hypnosis journey, an autoethnographic narrative, revealed not as a snapshot during a single interview, or as a result of a single questionnaire, but a developing tale of a period of time in her life during which the seeds of her adult obesity were being planted. Through a series of, often very emotional hypnosis sessions, she was able to step into her childhood shoes, and rediscover, understand and reclaim her past, in order to move forward in her life.

Conclusion

Since their early days and for over 150 years the two disparate modalities of hypnosis and ethnography have been developing, weathering controversy, and adapting to the changing attitudes and opinions of academics and practitioners of their respective arts. Their difficult gestation and turbulent subsequent life histories have led to frequent periods of internecine squabbling but ultimately to a position where, each from its own perspective could be seen as reflecting a common purpose – the educing of a personal narrative from and by the owner of that narrative. Despite its contentious beginnings and the continuing controversies and opprobrium surrounding its use, autoethnography, whether written/performed from an evocative or an analytical standpoint, has become an accepted and respected means of exploring and demonstrating personal and social issues ([Short *et al.*, 2013](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref060); [Holman Jones *et al.*, 2013](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref047); [Sparkes, 2018](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref062" \o ")).

Equally so, hypnosis has also come of age ([Brann *et al.*, 2012](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref010); [Elkins, 2016](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref019); [Entwistle, 2017](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref024)). The facility of hypnosis to elicit subconscious autobiographical narratives is attested to by a wealth of peer-reviewed papers, clinical reports, proceedings of learned societies and textbooks on hypnosis and hypnotherapy ([Hartland, 1971](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref043); [Erickson, 1980](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref027); [Lynn and Kirsch, 2006](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref052); [Heap, 2012](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref044); [Brann *et al.*, 2012](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref010); [Weisberg, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref079) and many other). Autoethnography hypnosis has been successfully utilised to explore and demonstrate the emotional childhood and early adulthood roots of many physical and psychological disorders, including anorexia ([Danese and Tan, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref016" \o "); [Hemmingsson](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref046" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref046" \o ")*[, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref046" \o "); [El-Behadli *et al.*, 2015](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref018)), unexplained infertility ([Entwistle and Turner, 1986](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref025); [Entwistle, 1988](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref022); [James, 2009](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref048); [Vyas *et al.*, , 2013](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref072); [Frederiksen](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref030" \o ")*[et al.](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref030" \o ")*[, 2015](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref030" \o ")) and obesity ([Entwistle *et al.*, 2014](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref026), [2016](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true#ref023)).

The time appears ripe therefore for hypnosis to become recognised and accepted in other realms of *academe*, and to be seen as a valid addition to the compendium of classical sociological case study methodologies. The creation of hypnosis evoked autobiographical stories seems to the author to sit well within the ambit of the autoethnographic movement. The process of hypnosis can reveal and illuminate the social, abled/disabled, gendered, cultural, and racial roots of individuals' lives, the constituted “storied bodies and storied selves” as described by [Sparkes (1999)](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JOE-07-2019-0029/full/html?skipTracking=true" \l "ref061" \o "). This inner unconscious biography is the life history that underlies, and which continues to influence from behind the scenes, one's own or another's physical, psychological and social behaviour patterns.

Through hypnotic regression it is becomes possible to explore, discover, recollect, understand and critique the impact that past events, experiences, social and societal pressures, cultural and gendered attitudes and mores, can all have, on our own life and on the lives of those others around us. In this respect it appears fully able to replicate and emulate the work being produced by those respected voices currently working within the autoethnography arena. Clearly however hypnosis, even more than autoethnography, can at times result in *too much* information coming to light, some of which may not be relevant to the overall study. This is especially the case when using individuals as case study representatives of a larger cohort or organisation, where too much individual “fine detail” can obscure or at least impair the development of an overall accurate ethnography of that organisation. In such cases, judicious decisions may need to be made as to what should be included in the final output - striking a balance metaphorically between the “woods and trees” as it were.

It is against this backdrop therefore that the author of this paper would like to draw attention to the potential for hypnosis to be utilised as an autoethnographic tool. Hypnosis and self-hypnosis can be invaluable in helping an individual researcher to explore and understand their own personal or organisational life situation, whilst sociology in general will find benefits from using hypnosis to facilitate a deeper understanding of participants' interactions and concerns within their organisation, cultural group or society.

Hypnosis can be utilised to provide a valid and intensely personal description of an individual's life, not just his or her recent, aware and adult life, but of their inner, subconscious and perhaps childhood experiences. The information so obtained and its verbalisation as part of a hypnotherapy session would seem to bear all of the important hallmarks of and *sine qua non* for classical performance autoethnography, which supports the author's belief that hypnosis could prove to be an innovative and effective modality for use in sociological and ethnological research.

Note

1.

There is a longer and non-Western history of hypnosis, but this is not the focus of this article.

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