
EVERYDAY TRANCE: LULLABY AS A HYPNOTIC PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

A lullaby is a lilting singsong that has taken children through the difficult passage from waking to sleep in every culture since ancient times. In crossing the no man's land that precedes falling asleep, the vigilant self is supposed to give up control, have confidence, and welcome a different state of consciousness. Indeed, it is the caregiver who gets the baby to sleep, the transitive phrasal verb showing the subject's awareness that he/she is performing an action whereby sleep is induced. Both the caregiver and the psychotherapist (through lulling to sleep by singing and hypnotic induction, respectively) use tools such as relationship/rapport, non-verbal communication, relaxation, attention focusing, direct suggestions, nonsense and confusion, and ritualistic and repetitive action. This shows that popular wisdom (the caregiver's practical, experiential, and intuitive approach) and technical knowledge (the hypnotherapist's theoretical, rational, and predictable techniques) make use of the same functional dynamics of human beings.

Keywords: Everyday trance; hypnosis; lullaby; rapport

INTRODUCTION

Transition from being awake to sleeping may be difficult for children across all cultures, as falling asleep requires serenity and trust.

In fact, for the vigilant self to give up control, thereby allowing a different mode of being to emerge, diving into Lethe, through a process of self-abandonment, is necessary. To that purpose, the physical and emotional presence of a caregiver, wakeful guardian as well as reassuring protector, facilitates the reduction and loss of conscious control over reality, thus making it possible for a different state of consciousness to arise.

More specifically, lulling to sleep by singing is the practice whereby, in every culture since ancient times, caregivers have induced transition to sleep.

The present study examines the possible analogies between the experiential nature of a caregiver's lullaby and the technical nature of a psychotherapist's hypnotic induction.

WHAT IS A LULLABY

Music – meant as the transmission of emotions through sounds and rhythms, like in a mother's soothing singsong to her child – is universally widespread (Malloch and Trevarthen, 2009) and apparently already present in human evolution before the development of language (Montagu, 2017).

The Greek poet Theocritus (Syracuse, 315–260 BC) writes how Alcmena, the mother of Hercules and his twin brother Iphiclus, would lull them both to sleep by using a shield as a

cradle (Teocrito, 1993). The fact that a poem that is more than two thousand years old contains a description of such a practice obviously confirms that lullabies were widespread in ancient times.

In fact, in Greek mythology, Hypnos (Sleep) and Thanatos (Death) are twin brothers and the sons of Nyx, the goddess of the night – hence the fear of disappearing into the unknown darkness, the non-being, by giving in to the twin sleep of death.¹

The Italian encyclopedia *Treccani* gives the definition of a lullaby as:

Nenia, cantilena dal ritmo monotono e cadenzato, con la quale si cullano i bambini cercando di addormentarli, diffusissima fra le canzoni popolari di ogni nazione. Nella forma artistica è un componimento breve, concettualmente assai povero e privo di nessi logici, dalla melodia ordinariamente monotona, di andamento lento quasi ad accompagnare il movimento della culla.

Singsong, chanting in a monotonous and lilting rhythm, by which the children try to sleep, widespread among the popular songs of every nation. In the artistic form, lullaby is a short composition, conceptually very poor and without logical connections, whose melody is ordinarily monotonous, of slow tempo and which seems to accompany the movement of the cradle (our translation)

Treccani highlights the intimate bond between the 'singing' ('cantilena') and 'lulling to sleep' ('si cullano i bambini cercando di addormentarli') that aims at establishing the physical and emotional closeness whereby the child can safely fall asleep.

Moreover, the Italian for lullaby – *ninna nanna* – is a reduplication, which refers to both sleep and the child. In fact, in some dialects (e.g., Neapolitan) *ninno* stands for the child and *nanna* for sleep (Ranisio, 2016).

The Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines a lullaby as 'a soft, gentle song sung to make a child go to sleep', according to the OED: 'lull' from Latin 'lallare' 'to sing to sleep' and 'by' from 'bye-bye, goodbye', thus thus revealing the connection between the verb to lull and the Italian lallazioni, i.e. baby babble, as well as the relevance of proximity due to the ending by (Castro, 2013).

In French, the word for lullaby is *berceuse*, deriving from *bercer*, which means to rock. It is interesting that the word in English is almost an auto-antonym; not only does it suggest gentle movement, but also a rock is hard and immovable. Of course, both convey a sense of safety; to rock is a nurturing action, while a rock is safe, solid and dependable.

From a structural point of view, most lullabies are characterized by four elements: rhythmicity, musicality, vocality, and corporeality. Together, they make up the ritual and repetitive formula that, thanks to its hypnotic effect, turns into the 'magic' virtually making the child go to sleep. Moreover, lullaby music is common in all cultures and is, therefore, easily recognizable as such (Trehub et al., 1993a). Namely, its typical beat consists of a moderate tempo, with even rhythm, and usually in 6/8 time. The sound of the mother's heart, the continuous and most important sound of the child's foetal life, has the same triple meter: 3/4.

Indeed, music and singing have a special relevance in the early stages of life, and lullabies, specifically, can calm, soothe, and comfort the child so as to induce an emotional state that facilitates transition to a different state of consciousness, i.e. sleep.

Several studies have shown the therapeutic effect of lullabies in given clinical situations as well as their important role in the psychophysical development of the child, whose language, cognition, memory, and attention are precisely enhanced by them. Studies have even demonstrated that pre-term babies lulled to sleep while in intensive care units show a faster growth and therefore leave the hospital three days earlier than the average (Walker, 1998; Farhat et al., 2010). It is reported that lullabies can increase a baby's tolerance to having a cannula inserted. Lullabies can thus reduce pain, and improve nutrition and physiological homeostasis as well as caregiving (Hiroko and Ikuko, 2019; Berna and Esenay, 2019). Conversely, auditory deprivation, such as the absence of maternal heartbeat rhythm and voice, has a negative impact on brain maturation (Haslbeck and Bassler, 2018).

Similarly, mothers singing lullabies also show measurable effects: namely, an increase in oxytocin secretion (oxytocin being a hormone-promoting attachment) and a reduction of the stress-related hormone known as ACTH (Corbeil et al., 2016). Moreover, lullabies improve mother–child interactions, reduce the amount of child's crying (Robertson and Detmer, 2019), and decrease stress and anxiety in both the mother and the child (Yakobson et al., 2020; Gunes and Gunes, 2012).

Trance is also induced, deepened, and ended through dance and music all over the world. As, for example, in the shamanic healing techniques, which require, for the healing act to be effective, that shamans enter a different state of consciousness, usually induced by repetitive and monotonous singsongs possibly lasting many hours and often accompanied by drums or rattles (Eliade, 1974). Or as in the various arrangements set up by Franz Mesmer in his Paris studio, which was equipped with mirrors and dim lights and where music was played and words were whispered to the patient in a chanting rhythm, similar to a lullaby (Kelly and Kelly, 1985).

LULLABY AND HYPNOSIS

Although lullabies and hypnosis induce different states of consciousness, some aspects are common to both practices and are worth investigating, namely:

- relationship / rapport
- non-verbal communication
- relaxation
- attention focusing
- direct suggestions
- nonsense, confusion
- ritual, repetitiveness

RELATIONSHIP / RAPPORT

A deep and exclusive relationship characterizes the caregiver–child interaction, as described in the following excerpt:

During the lullaby ritual, the singing is one with the cradling and sounds initially seem to guide the child. Later, and throughout the lullaby, it becomes clear that the child guides the

mother. As the child gives in to maternal-voice sounds, his/her heaviness changes, and the mother automatically, although most often unconsciously, perceives such change. While cradling her baby, the mother welcomes, and indeed mimics, the child's decreasing muscle tension as he/she has fallen asleep, and accordingly modifies the tension in her own arms as well as her sound and voice emission.

(de Angelis, 2006, p. 271, our translation)

Such multimodal and circular mother/child communication recalls the techniques of pacing and leading as well as mirroring, both used in hypnotic induction to establish a deep emotional connection through several registers and perspectives.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

The look, the smiles, the facial mimicry, the way of singing, the tone of voice (Trehub et al., 1993b), the pauses, the pace of speech, the posture, the body movements, even the end of the performance, all adjust to the child's reactions.

The same deep dialogue characterizes the tie between hypnotherapists and their clients since both the child and the client are not passive receptors but positive and proactive care-receivers (Nardone et al., 2006).

In the Palo Alto Mental Research Institute, five axioms of human communication have been formulated, the first being 'One cannot not communicate' (Watzlawick et al., 1971, p. 41). More specifically, the verbal part of communication accounts for about 7%, while para-verbal communication (the tone of voice, timbre, and rhythm) accounts for 38% and non-verbal communication (gestures, posture, facial mimicry) accounts for 55 % (Watzlawick et al., 1971). In the same way, one cannot not respond to communication either. These principles, which a caregiver knows intuitively, are well known to hypnotherapists, who use them both when inducing trance and during the therapeutic session.

RELAXATION

In order to calm the child and foster the necessary self-abandonment that precedes falling asleep, instant images of serenity, peace, and security are conveyed by a reassuring, deep, and persuasive tone of voice (Trehub et al., 1993b). Here is an example from Lazio (Saffioti, 1994):

*Fatte la nanna, fiiu meu ch'è notte
Le pecorelle so' restrate tutte
E so' restrate piccoline e grosse – nanna-o
Bellu de mamma giarzomina amore
Non piagne fiiu meu ecco a zinnella
Tirame pure 'e viscere du core
Che tantu mamma tea non se ne cura
Fatte la ninna fiiu meu gentile
Lo letto te l'o' fatto de viole
E pe' coperta lo cielo sereno
E pè cuscino te do er core mio – nanna-o.*

*Go to sleep my baby, for the night has come
and all the sheep are back,
small and big – nanna o
Mommy's jasmine sweetheart,
don't cry my baby, here's mom's breast,
you can pull my heart away
'cause mom will not care.
Go to sleep my little baby,
I've made you a bed of violets
and here's a clear sky for blanket
and my own heart for pillow, my love– nanna-o.
(our translation)*

The lyrics do not differ much from the following hypnotic suggestion in *Handbook of Hypnotic Suggestions and Metaphors*

Starting now, as you go to bed every night, you'll be calm, and at ease, your mind and body will be calm, tranquil and relaxed. You'll be able to sleep calmly, at peace, able to sleep the way you did when you were a baby – so calm, so relaxed.

(Hammond, 1990, p.116)

ATTENTION FOCUSING

As the child is being put to sleep, anything that is not part of his/her relationship with the mother is usually left out of the field of consciousness, thus focusing the child's attention while reducing external distractions.

Several lullabies can actually be very effective in capturing the child's attention perhaps also because they evoke frightening scenarios. The following Tuscan lullaby may be a good example (Saffioti, 1994):

*Fai la nanna, bambinello,
che ti canto una novella
d'un bellissimo agnellino
bianco e liscio e bel musino;
se ne andava ritto e snello
a bere l'acqua di un ruscello.
Ma da un buco cupo cupo
esce fuori un grosso lupo
alla morte lo condanna
bambinello fai la nanna
bambinello fai la nanna.*

*Go to sleep, my little baby,
let me sing you about a lamb
who was beautiful and nice*

*with a nose so smooth and white;
 he went straight and slender-shaped
 to drink water from a stream
 but he came across a wolf
 big and up a hole so dark
 that he died for sure, sweetheart
 go to sleep, my baby love,
 go to sleep, my baby love.*

(our translation)

Here not only is the child's attention obtained through a scary story but a powerful metaphor is also employed, i.e. the lamb as a vigilant consciousness disappearing in the dark (the wolf's mouth).

Actually, Milton Erickson, the father of modern therapeutic hypnosis, would also often use stories and anecdotes in order to capture patients' attention, so as to weaken their conscious attitudes and induce trance. Storytelling is indeed one of the most widely used ways to change states of consciousness! In fact, abandoning one's customary conscious structure allows the mitigation of one's automatic functioning, thereby making room for new and creative associative modes (Erickson, 1983).

However, attention focusing can be achieved through several hypnosis techniques. To tackle insomnia, for example, the following technique is suggested: as well as deep muscle relaxation, the patient is asked to imagine he/she is writing and then erasing numbers from 100 down inside a circle on a blackboard; every time a number is written, it must then be erased and the phrase 'deep sleep' must be written on one side of the circle, and then rewritten exactly over the previous one (Bauer and McCanne, 1980).

DIRECT SUGGESTIONS

Falling asleep may be made easier by stressing and repeating words or phrases like sleep, go to sleep, close your eyes, fall asleep, over and over again as in this lullaby from Sicily (Saffioti, 1994):

*A la vo' fighiuzza mia chista è l'ura di la vo'
 A la vo' fighiuzza mia chista è l'ura di la vo'
 Quannu addunanu li stiddi e cumpari già la luna
 a la vo' chista è l'ura di la vo'
 Quannu l'unni di lu mari s'assicutano 'ntra jddi
 a la vo' chista è l'ura di la vo'
 Quannu u sulì 'nta lu celu lentu lentu già scumpari
 a la vo' chista è l'ura di la vo'*

*Go to sleep my little girl, it is time to fall asleep
 go to sleep, it is time to fall asleep
 when stars shine above and the moon shows too
 go to sleep, it is time to fall asleep*

*when the waves rise, chase each other in the sea,
go to sleep, it is time to fall asleep
when the sun in the sky slowly starts to disappear
go to sleep, it is time to fall asleep*

(our translation)

The same evocative words, i.e. recalling sleep, are used in the hypnotic treatment of insomnia. Moreover, the 'go to sleep, sleep' suggestion is reinforced by the associated focus on the different body parts (Graham et al., 1975).

NONSENSE, CONFUSION

Both nonsense and confusion are present in lullabies – often made up on the spot according to sound and rhyme requirements, as when well-known motifs are revisited to include the mother's or both parents' fantasies and wishes.

Our translation of a Tuscan lullaby is a good example (Saffioti, 1994):

*Ninna nanna il mio ciocione
e di pane non ce n'è un boccone
né del crudo e né del cotto
né del macinato troppo.
Il mugnaio non è venuto
lo potesse mangiare il lupo
e il lupo e la lupaia
li venisse l'anguinaia.
L'anguinaia l'è mala cosa
e più su ci sta una sposa
e più giù ce ne sta un'altra
una fila e una l'annaspa.
Una fa il cappellino di paglia
per portarlo alla battaglia
la battaglia e 'l battaglino
dettero foco a Barberino.
Barberino corri corri
dette foco a quelle torri
una torre la si spezzò
il bambino s'addormentò.*

*Go to sleep my little baby
there's no bread for us to eat
neither cooked, raw, ground.
There's no miller here around
may the wolf and all its mates
eat him up, his groin inflamed.
Inflamed groin is no good thing*

*there's a bride up there to spin
and another down to fumble.
One spins straw to make a hat
to be worn on battleground
battles here and battles there
Barberino was on fire.
Barberino running fast
burnt those towers into dust
one of them went on its feet
and the baby fell asleep.*

(our translation)

The scenes in this lullaby do not follow a logical progression but, rather, a free association of ideas and images as in a dream state. Actually, dreams fit very well to lullabies and the lulling to sleep, as the sequence quoted above shows. Moreover, lullabies are an archaic element of folk culture, preserving the sense of casting a spell upon the child.

Erickson skilfully used confusion techniques to facilitate dissociation and trance. Confusion destabilizes and produces an unpleasant situation that causes uncertainty. Nobody likes uncertainty, and one becomes more inclined to listen to suggestions and even welcome them to prevent a state of uncertainty. Confusion breaks the usual patterns of reference, thereby making it easier for creativity to arise from the unconscious process (Erickson et al., 1976).

RITUAL, REPETITIVENESS

In all lullabies, words and verses are repeated several times, as are rhythm and melody. Repetitiveness also applies to the movement of the cradle or the cradling of the child in one's arms, hence both aural and vestibular stimulation accompany the vigilant self's self-abandonment. Actually, the distance/rapprochement gesture that comes with the cradling is reassuring and encouraging, as well as producing a protected space made familiar by the mother's voice and heartbeat. Moreover, both the swinging movement and the soothing voice may induce a state of reverie also in the mother, a sort of autohypnosis that, more often than not, makes her go to sleep too.

Every time one indulges in repetitive rhythms or patterns (as in traditional sacred dance movements), the state of consciousness changes. The simple thought of a rocking motion, like that of a swing or a boat, induces a state of tranquillity and relaxation. Erickson even envisaged, together with suggestions of a repetitive movement, the use of the calm and slow repetition of suggestions to enable the subject to reach a state of peace and serenity where the meaning of the suggestions can be easily processed (Del Castello and Casilli, 2007).

CONCLUSION

The lullaby, a universally widespread practice of accompanying the passage from waking to sleeping since ancient times, makes use of procedures that are similar in many ways to those employed in hypnotic induction.

Actually, popular wisdom has always used the peculiarities and functional mechanisms of human beings to help children fall asleep and the same applies to Milton Erickson's hypnotic techniques where such mechanisms and resources have been systematized.

Moreover the tie between the caregiver and the child is continually changing and re-modelling itself. Similarly, the relationship between the therapist and the client, which allows the confident abandonment to hypnotic trance to occur, is dynamically modelled and customized by the peculiarity of the therapeutic relation.

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NOTES

- 1 Lullabies are often similar to funeral wakes. Anthropologist Ernesto de Martino even pointed out the virtual analogy between the lulling motion and the rhythmic movement of mourners' torso (Lomax, 1956; de Martino, 1975).

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