
Dissociation: Unraveling the Complex Web of the Mind

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ABSTRACT: Dissociation is a complex psychological phenomenon with diverse manifestations, from mere absorption to severe amnesia, and is often associated with traumatic experiences or defense mechanisms. This article explores the historical conceptualization of dissociation by figures like Pierre Jeanne and Carl Jung, its symptoms, causes, and portrayals in popular culture and real-life stories. It elaborates on the different types of dissociation, the challenges in diagnosis and treatment, and its connection with childhood abuse, substance abuse, hypnosis, and meditation. Notable real-life cases like Herschel Walker, Karen Overhill, Kim Noble, Chris Sizemore, and Juanita Maxwell are examined alongside fictional portrayals in "Psycho" and "Fight Club." The article underscores the need for early recognition and intervention, awareness, and understanding of dissociation to develop better therapeutic approaches and reduce the associated stigma.

KEYWORDS: Dissociation, Dissociative Identity Disorder, Mental Health Diagnosis, Psychological Trauma.

1. INTRODUCTION

The intricacies of the human mind have long been a subject of interest and study for psychologists and researchers worldwide. Dissociation, a psychological phenomenon deeply embedded within the mind's coping mechanisms, traces its conceptual roots to French psychologist Pierre Jeanne. With its diverse manifestations, ranging from mere absorption to severe amnesia, dissociation can sometimes obscure the boundaries between reality and fiction. While some, like Carl Jung, perceive it as an essential function of the conscious mind, its extreme manifestations have often been misinterpreted, leading to misdiagnoses. This article delves deep into the many facets of dissociation, its symptoms, causes, and its portrayal in popular culture and real-life stories. From the haunting tale of Norman Bates in "Psycho" to the multifaceted personalities of real-life individuals like Herschel Walker and Karen Overhill, we uncover the profound and enigmatic world of dissociation.

Dissociation is a psychological phenomenon attributed to a number of defense mechanisms. This concept was put forward by the French psychologist Pierre Jeanne. However, Jeanne was not entirely in favor of the idea that dissociation is a defense mechanism. He argued that dissociation only occurs in people who have had a constitutional weakness of mental functions that leads to hysteria when they are under stress. Jeanne argued that dissociation is a mental or cognitive deficit. According to him, trauma is one of the various stressors that can exacerbate the hysterics' already acquired <mental deficit>, thus causing a cascade of hysterics, or in today's parlance, dissociative symptoms.

The famous Swiss psychologist Carl Jung described the pathological manifestations of dissociation as extreme or special cases of the normal functioning of the psyche. According to Jung, dissociation is a natural requirement of consciousness in order for it to function.

Like most psychological phenomena, dissociation has its different types, which differ greatly in their position on the norm-pathology scale. In other words, sometimes a person suffering from dissociation needs some help or even just counseling, and more complex cases may require psychiatric intervention. This is actually a big problem, because as much as there is information and knowledge about this circumstance, there is also a lack of it, especially in the field of diagnostics. The more serious types of dissociation mentioned later, such as dissociative disorder, are quite rare. That is why specialists do not deal with this problem in a practical way. Sometimes the symptoms of dissociative disorder can become the cause of misdiagnosis, as some of these symptoms overlap with the signs of other disorders

Dissociative symptoms include:

- ❖ Out-of-body experience
- ❖ Feeling like you are a different person sometimes
- ❖ The feeling of a strong heartbeat
- ❖ Feeling emotionally numb or isolated
- ❖ Lack or absence of pain sensation
- ❖ Altered sense of time
- ❖ Forgetting how you got to a place
- ❖ Tunnel vision
- ❖ Hearing voices in the head
- ❖ Stressful experiences that seem real - having flashbacks
- ❖ Immobility
- ❖ Being absorbed in a fantasy world as if it were real

In addition to these symptoms, warning signs are also listed that can help understand the presence of dissociation when the above symptoms are <hidden>. These signs include:

- ❖ rapid mood swings
- ❖ difficulties in remembering personal information
- ❖ forgetting what was said or done
- ❖ changing behaviors and abilities
- ❖ depression, anxiety, and panic attacks
- ❖ Thoughts of suicide and self-harm
- ❖ abuse

Dissociation is mostly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and schizophrenia. However, it can also be associated with other disorders, such as acute stress disorder, borderline personality disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and affective disorders.

The reasons for dissociation are different. Among them are trauma, drugs, hypnosis, and meditation. Trauma can have different natures. Per traumatic dissociation can occur for the following reasons:

- ❖ Sexual or physical abuse
- ❖ Child abuse
- ❖ Combat trauma
- ❖ Torture or imprisonment
- ❖ Traffic accident
- ❖ Natural disasters

Among the mentioned reasons, the most attention is paid to violence against children. When a child is subjected to violence in early childhood, even more so when it has a constant, long-term nature, there is a high probability of the formation of dissociative symptoms, mainly amnesia related to the memories of the abuse, which has been studied with clinical examples and connected with that trauma. It was also observed that female children who were victims of child abuse scored higher on dissociative tests than male representatives who had undergone the same trauma.

A non-clinical sample of adult women associated high levels of dissociation with sexual abuse by an older person before the age of 15.

Other drugs that because dissociation include ketamine, nitrous oxide, tile amine, amphetamine, dextromethorphan, methoxamine, salvia, muscimol, atropine, minocycline, MK-801, PCP, and other substances. In such cases, the dissociation is temporary, but in the case of abuse of these substances, the dissociative state is here.

Hypnosis and meditation also cause temporary dissociation. Hypnosis can induce dissociation to help with post-traumatic stress disorder, pain, addiction, or anxiety. And in the case of meditation, dissociation is associated with success and the desired result, because that is exactly what yogis are trying to do: separate themselves from reality, mentally leave their body and lose physical boundaries. In this case, dissociation is not dangerous, because it is thought out, planned, and managed. Experienced yogis, after reaching such a state of mind, can completely return to their initial state.

Forms

The forms of dissociation are as follows:

• Absorption

Absorption is a special state of attention and consciousness, in which a person is more tense, he is characterized by interest, surprise, activity, and being carried away by activity. It may seem like just a state of concentration, attributed to such traits as diligence, willpower, and curiosity. However, there is a big difference. Absorption is not productive by nature. In this case, various types of internal activity are temporarily suspended and the human condition can be confused with concentration, but absorption is perceived by a person as a game and fun.

• Dispersion

Daydreaming or daydreaming are forms of dissociative nature. In such a case, in contrast to absorption, one's thoughts and intentions are scattered. He can perform any action, but not be involved mentally at all. For example, he can write, but in accordance with the movements of his desire, what he writes will be absent in his mind, or read and completely forget what he was reading, or completely forget the topic of the conversation in the middle of the conversation, and only hear the voice of the interlocutor, not the expressed thought.

• Depersonalization

Depersonalization is a state of unique duality. A person who experiences such a state seems to have lost the sense of the reality of his body and the world around him. It seems to him that he has lost his emotions, some elements of imagination, and parts of his psyche. A person feels that his psyche is empty. According to him, he loses his Self. In some texts about dissociation, decreolization is also mentioned as a separate form, which is more directed towards the loss of the sense of the reality of the external world, rather than one's own personality. However, these two types are quite interconnected with each other, because a person, being a social being, perceives his own self and the outside world as a single fusion.

• Dissociative identity changes

In the presence of dissociative changes in identity, the effect is seen in the fundamental unity of the self-concept. This idea has been discussed a lot in Rogers' psychological theory and the importance of the unity of the concept of the self has been emphasized. Such thoughts can also be found in Jungian psychology. It is clear how important the state of mental balance, unity, and harmony is for the productive functionality of a person. And dissociation brings about a dissonant state and breaks that balance.

The phenomenon of duality occurs when the events taking place in the mental world seem to be perceived by two separate independent individuals, each of which has its own cognitive properties.

Because of this type of dissociation, it was long called multiple personality disorder, but it is now known as dissociative identity disorder (DID). In the case of the first term, it was understood that there are multiple individuals

in one human body. However, this is not really true, because these individuals are not separate, fully functional, and proper shepherds. In some stories, there are characters who easily switch from one personality to another and are aware of the existence of their multiple personalities, share thoughts and feelings with each other, can easily express the feelings of other personalities, and easily control them. However, in real cases, everything is much more serious and complicated. And the biggest difference from such a characteristic is the phenomenon of amnesia, which is mentioned in the next paragraph.

• Amnesia

Amnesia is a memory disorder that affects various memory functions. There are four common situations of amnesia. First, when apperception is disturbed, that is, the perception of new information, its successful entry into the field of memory. In the second case, apperception is possible, but the ability to memorize information is impaired. In the third case, the experiences received during a certain period of time become inaccessible to memory. And in the fourth case, the function of reproduction is disturbed.

In the topic of dissociation, three phenomena are distinguished: primary, secondary, and tertiary. During the primary, as a result of the traumatic situation, the somatosensory elements are isolated. In the case of the secondary one, derealization, the feeling of leaving the body comes forward. And in the case of tertiary dissociation, ego-states are formed, which carry traumatic experiences, and complex individual identities, which have their own cognitive, affective, and behavioral data.

As already mentioned, the symptoms of people with dissociative disorder are often misdiagnosed because they are associated with other disorders. On average, the diagnosis and treatment of people with dissociative disorder takes eight years. DSM-IV-TR considers the symptoms of depersonalization, derealization, and psychogenic amnesia to be part of dissociative disorder. There are two most commonly used diagnostic tools. They are the Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES), during which twenty-eight questions are asked and the examinee must evaluate how often he is related to the mentioned phenomena in his life, and the Multiscale Dissociation Inventory tests.

Treatment

There are different ways of treating dissociative disorder, but they are methods used in a wider range and not specifically created for this problem. They are:

- ❖ Psychotherapy
- ❖ Cognitive Behavioral Therapy CBT
- ❖ Hypnotherapy
- ❖ Family therapy
- ❖ Phase trauma treatment
- ❖ Dialectical Behavioral Therapy DBT
- ❖ Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing EMDR

2. DISSOCIATION IN FILMS AND LITERATURE

Examples of dissociative disorders are often found in literature and films because pathological dissociation can seem tempting to authors. Most often they use the idea of having several personalities. Famous examples are Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho and David Fincher's Fight Club. The character of Norman Bates in Psycho is a wonderful example of dissociative disorder because it shows the situation from an objective point of view and for the observer, it is understandable what is happening. Norman Bates had a cruel childhood, he witnessed the murder of his father committed by his mother, who subjected him to domestic violence before that. In the future, his mother kept him under her pressure, and if not physically, then at least she subjected him to emotional abuse. In other words, it is understandable that the character goes through childhood trauma.

In the film, murders are committed and although Norman seems to be a kind and calm person who has no motive, they start to suspect him. Although the image of the mother is not shown, it is dominant and oppressive, you can hear the arguments between her and Norman and how Norman surrenders. One of the characters sees the mother's shadow during another assassination attempt. The murder is not successful and the character is looking for the woman. However, he finds the woman's bones, dressed and leaning on the chair. Examining the scene in shock, he turns around and sees Norman, in his mother's clothes, holding a knife and ready to attack him. The character is saved and Norman is sent to a psychiatric hospital, where they conclude that his mother traumatized and oppressed him so much that after her death, Norman developed a personality disorder and his mother was reborn in Norman's body, so to speak. Of course, the story is very far-fetched, but it describes well the reason for Norman's behavior and how he did not remember anything. At the end of the film, when it is determined that Norman is not guilty of the murder, the audience finally gets a close-up of the character of Norman's mother, which gives her a look that makes Norman seem like a completely different person.

David Fincher's film of the same name, based on Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Battle Club*, is completely different from the previous example in that it presents a subjective view of a person suffering from dissociative disorder, involving three different characters played by different actors, Brad Pitt, Edward North, and Helena Bonham Carter. Only by analyzing the film, it is understood that all these are the pieces of a person's broken personality. It is also interesting that one of the characters is a woman, that is, the inherent qualities of a person, such as age, gender, orientation, etc., do not set limits for this disorder.

These two are interesting artistic examples. However, in real life, there are equally interesting examples that are not just the products of a screenwriter's imagination. Such examples are the famous actress Marilyn Monroe, Herschel Walker, Karen Overhill, Kim Noble, and others.

In the book *Breaking Free*, Herschel Walker describes his life. As a child, Walker was overweight and had a speech impediment. According to him, a dissociative disorder began to form in him as a coping mechanism. One of his alter egos was a highly motivated <soldier>, thanks to which Walker achieved an athletic build, demonstrated great athletic talent and became an NFL football player. It was another ego <the hero> that was responsible for creating his public image. He was unaware of his disorder for years and did not even remember the Heisman award he received. After he stopped playing football, his personalities began to interfere with each other, as a result of which the former football player fell into depression, even making a suicide attempt.

Karen Overhill was 29 years old when she went to the doctor for depression. He tells how he was abused by his father and grandfather as a child. Having worked with Overhill for twenty years, the doctor finds seventeen personalities in him. Thanks to hypnosis, the doctor, Dr. Baer, manages to combine these personalities into a single, fully functional personality. Dr. Baer later wrote a book about the incident, *Switching Time. A Doctor's Harrowing Story of Treating a Woman with 17 Personalities*.

Kim Noble describes her dissociative disorder in her autobiography *All of Me*. He was born in an unhappy family, instead of his parents, their various acquaintances and relatives followed Noble, and he was subjected to constant early childhood abuse. At that time, his psyche was divided and Noble had more than a hundred personalities. After various incidents at a young age, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. After being discharged from the psychiatric hospital, he found himself in various unexpected and incomprehensible situations, until 1995 he was diagnosed with dissociative disorder. The name of her dominant personality is Patricia, under whose influence Noble became an artist and was able to take care of her daughter.

The Three Faces of Eve is a popular movie and book based on a real person, Chris Sizemore. Sizemore actually had twenty-two different personalities, but only three are mentioned in the book. Some of his personalities die and are replaced with personalities who have different abilities, interests, and ways of thinking. Over the years, after passing through eight doctors, only Sizemore begins to feel how his personalities are integrated into one functional one. He describes his dream in which his personalities are in the Greek arena, holding hands, leaving together, and never returning.

Another famous case is the murder committed by Juanita Maxwell. Maxwell did not remember at all how he killed 73-year-old Inez Kelly with a light bulb in 1979. And Wanda Watson remembered the incident very well and confessed it. Juanita and Wanda lived in the same body. Maxwell worked at the hotel where Kelly hosted. Watson mentions how Kelly took a pen from him and didn't want to return it, thus causing such a conflict. During the trial, the judge declares Maxwell not guilty, considering that it is the result of a mental disorder, after which Maxwell is taken to a psychiatric hospital.

3. CONCLUSION

Dissociation is a multi-faceted psychological phenomenon that manifests in various ways and is influenced by numerous factors, from trauma to meditation. Its portrayal in literature and films brings attention to its complexities, while real-life examples emphasize the profound impact it can have on an individual's life. While often misunderstood or misdiagnosed, it's crucial to recognize and treat dissociative symptoms early on to ensure the mental well-being of those affected. Awareness and understanding of dissociation can aid in developing better therapeutic approaches and reducing the stigma associated with it.

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