

IATROGENESIS AND DISSOCIATION: A HISTORICAL NOTE

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ABSTRACT

This paper consists of a review of the pre-1950s literature discussing the concept of iatrogenesis in relation to hypnosis, multiple personality and trance mediumship. In this literature iatrogenic influence is not limited to a therapist's actions. The concept includes also the effects of groups such as those speculated to exist in circles devoted to trance mediumship. To some extent, discussions about iatrogenesis in this literature reflect power struggles between competing explanatory models of dissociation.

Throughout history dissociation phenomena have been explained in different ways. In his book *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (1970), Henri Ellenberger begins his discussion of the topic with a review of ideas about possession. Ellenberger then moves on to psychodynamic models that assume the existence of subconscious personalities. Other historians have studied physiological models of dissociation such as the role of the brain's hemispheres in explaining hypnosis and multiple personality (Harrington, 1987). Likewise, in this paper I will briefly review one of the explanatory models of dissociative phenomena prevalent in the pre-1950s literature on the subject. The model I will focus on is iatrogenesis, that is, the concept that the phenomena of dissociation are produced by such artifact as suggestion. Although most contemporary students of the subject, especially those with firsthand experience in treating phenomena such as multiple personality, argue that there is little or no evidence to support the iatrogenesis hypothesis (e.g., Martinez Taboas, 1990; Ross, Norton, & Fraser, 1989), iatrogenesis is not completely without proponents (e.g., Albridge-Morris, 1989; Kenny, 1986). My purpose here, however, is not to argue for the validity of iatrogenesis as an avenue of etiology. Rather I intend to briefly review ideas about this topic as they existed between the nineteenth century and 1950 in the literature of hypnosis, multiple personality, and mediumship. Further, I will extend the concept of iatrogenesis beyond the influence of a single individual (i.e., the therapist) during the course of therapy or clinical interviews to include the influence of groups and other individuals. I will not be concerned with attempts to intentionally produce phenomena such as secondary per-

sonalities, as seen in the work of Richet (1883) and Harriman (1943).

HYPNOSIS

During the nineteenth century many individuals were concerned with the idea that hypnotic phenomena were created by unconscious suggestions made by the therapist or the hypnotist. Some authors leveled this charge at Charcot and his mapping of the stages of hypnosis into lethargy, catalepsy and somnambulism (Charcot, 1882), ideas developed from work conducted with patients from the Salpêtrière. Charcot's rival, Bernheim, claimed he had never encountered Charcot's hypnotic stages except in a subject that had been previously treated at the Salpêtrière. In his opinion: "Subjected to a special training by manipulations, imitating the phenomena which she saw produced in other somnambulists of the same school, taught by imitation to exhibit reflex phenomena in a certain typical order, the case was no longer one of natural hypnotism, but a product of false training" (Bernheim, 1886/1889, pp. 90-91). In a widely cited critique of Charcot Alex Munthe (1929, p. 302) made a similar point. He suggested that what Charcot took to be the stages of hypnosis were merely his patients' responses to posthypnotic suggestions. In this view suggestions from specific individuals (e.g., therapists) or from the group context (e.g., collective behavior of other patients) were responsible for the hypnotic phenomenon.

Other physicians discussed hypnosis along the same view. Carpenter (1884) referred to "unconscious intimation of what is expected" (p. 619). Delboeuf (1886) discussed the influences of "education" and imitation on the manifestation of hypnotic phenomena. In a discussion of hypnosis and moral responsibility Binet and Féré (1887/1905) referred to artifacts in the use of hypnosis to induce recollections. They claimed: "The subject may err from... the suggestions of the experimenter, who has impressed upon her a recollection which is false" (p. 368). Such a process, explained Forel (1905/1906), was caused by "plasticity" due to the dissociation of brain activity. Consequently "every hypnotized person is weak and accommodating, and tries to guess the intentions of the hypnotist, so that he may carry them out" (p. 154).

SECONDARY PERSONALITIES

The literature on secondary or multiple personalities

also contains debates on these issues. In one of his first publications of clinical observations made with hypnotic alters, Pierre Janet (1887, p. 472) commented on the possibility of artifacts. That is, he warned therapists about the danger of suggesting to the subject phenomena observed in previous sessions. Janet also realized that once he had named a personality the personality became more life-like (Janet, 1889, p. 318). In addition, he argued that one of his subjects' (Leonie) previous hypnotic experiences with other hypnotists accounted for some of the dissociative behavior he originally observed (Janet, 1919/1925, Vol. 1, pp. 188-190).

William James (1890a) suggested that: "It is very easy in the ordinary hypnotic subject to suggest during trance the appearance of a secondary personage. . . . One has . . . to be on one's guard in this matter against confounding naturally double persons and persons who are simply temporarily endowed with the belief that they must play the part of being double." (p.475).

Later authors writing about MPD presented similar ideas. In an analysis of the Doris Fischer case, T. W. Mitchell (1921) argued that the therapist and the patient may have been in a hypnotic rapport. This could have led to "consciously or unconsciously given" suggestions to the patient. Brown (1926) considered the possibility that MPD may be the result of artifacts induced by the "hypnotic methods of investigation and treatment employed by their observers" (p. 260), and Harriman (1943) questioned to what extent were such cases "due to the interpretations which have been assigned to automatic behavior or to rules indirectly suggested to these subjects" (p. 643).

TRANCE MEDIUMSHIP

Another dissociative phenomena relevant to the issue under discussion is that of trance mediumship. These cases, recorded in the spiritualist and psychical research literatures, contain the claim of possession by spirits of deceased individuals. In this context Frederic W. H. Myers (1900, p. 402) argued that Allan Kardec, the well known codifier of spiritism in France during the middle of the nineteenth century, influenced his medium's automatic writings about reincarnation by suggestion because of Kardec's strong interest in the subject.

In *The Principles of Psychology* William James (1890b) argued that suggestion may affect mediumistic phenomena not only through the influences of a single individual, but from collective influences derived from the actions of the mediumistic circle or sitters. As James wrote referring to the secondary personalities of mediums: "Whether all sub-conscious selves are peculiarly susceptible to a certain stratum of the *Zeitgeist*, and get their inspiration from it, I know not; but this is obviously the case with the secondary selves which become 'developed' in spiritualist circles. . . . The subject assumes the rôle of a medium simply because opinion expects it of him under the conditions which are present (Vol. 1, p. 394).

The influence of the mediumistic circles on the appearance of behavior of spirit communicators was a topic dis-

cussed widely in the psychical research literature. Some researchers argued that the type of spirit communicators depended to some extent on the members composing the mediumistic circle (e.g., Lebedzinski, 1924, p. 289; Maxwell, 1903/1905, p. 65; Sudre, 1926, p. 78). In his well known *From India to the Planet Mars* (1899/1900), a study on the psychology of medium Hélène Smith, the Swiss psychologist Theodore Flournoy commented that the "doctrinal ideas of the surrounding environment are reflected together with the latent emotional tendencies of the medium herself" (p. 443).

Eleanor M. Sidgwick's (1915) paper about the psychology of the American medium Leonora E. Piper was another important study on the subject. In her paper Sidgwick argued: "That the sitters must influence the trance communications to some extent is . . . obvious. For one thing, they are themselves personages in the drama, and the part they play in it and the way they play it must affect the way the trance personalities play theirs. . . . And in the trance drama the sitters not only largely determine the subjects of conversation, but the personages who shall take part in it. They explicitly or tacitly demand that their own friends shall manifest themselves and produce evidence of identity, or give information on particular points" (p. 294).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this short note I have presented a brief and selective review of issues related to iatrogenesis and dissociative phenomena as they were discussed in the old literature on the subject. The problem, as can be seen in the above mentioned material, has been discussed in the literature of hypnosis, multiple personality disorder (MPD), and mediumship since the beginnings of systematic research on these subjects in the nineteenth century.

The above mentioned writings suggest two views of iatrogenesis. One, like the ideas of Bernheim and Brown, argues for the artificial creation of dissociative phenomena in general. Another, such as Sidgwick's, suggests that dissociative phenomena are shaped (but not necessarily created) by the therapist or by other individuals. In the first view phenomena such as MPD do not exist without iatrogenic intervention. In the second view the phenomena (e.g., behavior of alters) are thought to be affected by the context in which they are presented regardless of their etiology. That is, the way alters or "spirits" communicate, what they say, or even the frequency of their appearance may be shaped by the demand characteristics of a particular situation even if the context-independent nature of the phenomena is granted.

The discussion of the literature on mediumship (and to some extent also the literature on hypnosis) suggests an extension of the usual use of the term iatrogenesis. Instead of focusing on a therapist's influences on a patient, it is possible to conceptualize an iatrogenic process in which several individuals or environments are responsible for affecting the person in question.

These ideas have been used by some to discredit the concepts and methods of some individuals (i.e., Munthe's comments on Charcot and Myers' critique of Kardec). In

this sense arguments about iatrogenesis may have been used as ideological weapons in situations in which power struggles or paradigm clashes occurred (e.g., the well known debates between members of the Salpêtrière and Nancy schools of hypnosis during the nineteenth century). In more recent times we have seen similar discussions, albeit on a smaller scale. Kenny (1986) suggested that therapists unconsciously conspired with their patients to create a disorder. He used Morton Prince's Sally Beauchamp case as an example. In presenting this argument Kenny defended his own ideology regarding the nature and purpose of dissociation. But of course, those who deny the iatrogenic explanation also defend implicit conceptualizations of dissociation. Discussions of this sort are rarely limited to a dispassionate consideration of objective facts. They are dependent on particular world-views or theoretical models, such as those examined in the literature on the sociology of science (Pinch, 1990).

Regardless of the sociology of these issues the fact remains that the concept of iatrogenesis is an important part of the history of dissociation in the sense that the hypothesis was a factor in the creation of the conceptual tradition that contemporary therapists have inherited. It is my hope that future histories will discuss this inheritance in more detail. ■

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