

EDITORIAL:

DISSOCIATION IN CYBERSPACE

Richard P. Kluft, M.D.

Every few days I remember (or have a moment free) to pick up my e-mail. I am far from computer-savvy. I write with a fountain pen as a matter of principle as well as of personal preference. Nonetheless I have, with considerable trepidation and misgiving, moved beyond computer revulsion and computer phobia to a tolerable level of computer apprehension in order to take advantage (albeit timorously) of the flexibility and economy of electronic mail. I use it to keep in touch with friends and family all over the world. I also lurk (i.e., I listen in without contributing) to a number of discussion groups. It is an interesting way to "take the pulse" of a number of groups and subjects in which I take interest.

Among the groups to which I subscribe is the Dissociative Disorders Discussion Group, which is moderated with energy, discretion, and tact by Peter M.M. Barach, Ph.D. It constitutes a microcosm of the community of those interested in the dissociative disorders. I gather there are approximately 300 subscribers. Many of those in the discussion group are members of the ISSD, but many are not. Not unexpectedly, those who contribute to the ongoing discussions, those who ask for advice or help on clinical or research matters, and those who use it as a forum for the expression of their particular perspectives or psychopolitics represent the entire spectrum of experience and opinion in the dissociative disorders field. Some contributors are scholarly, some are neophytes who raise very basic questions. Some participants are supportive and encouraging, while some are bristling and argumentative. Some accept the dissociative disorders as legitimate mental disorders, while some are skeptics. Some seem to be trying to establish a cyberspace support group, and some are simply gossip-mongers. At times it is very much like being at a party in a small college town — in every corner a different type of conversation is being carried on, although within a basically intellectual atmosphere.

Some recent exchanges have concerned the current "memory wars," different approaches to selected clinical problems, the works of Pierre Janet, and the plight of therapists accused of malpractice by recanters and their families. To the neophyte in an e-mail discussion group, reading the messages in the order in which they arrive is very much like what the alters of my complex DID patients tell me about their experience in overhearing several simultaneous inner dialogs. At first it is overwhelming and somewhat chaotic,

but gradually it becomes possible to decipher who is responding to whom and what is related to what (or to "integrate" one's understanding of the group process).

Dr. Barach presides over the decorum of the discussion group, frequently reiterating rules and articulating boundaries. Many issues under discussion are controversial; at times feelings are expressed rather forcefully. On the infrequent occasions that affect rises beyond reasonable levels and/or the interchanges get out of hand, he intervenes as gracefully as possible to ensure the safety as well as the "netiquette" of the contributors. His touch is gentle and educative. On the rare occasions when matters become stormy, he assumes the demeanor of a stern elementary school teacher. Sometimes, I suspect he must have to be very stern in his direct communications to unruly discussion group members that are not sent to the discussion group as a whole. Dr. Barach is generous with his advice and help in matters of both scholarship and clinical work.

This discussion group is a valuable contribution to the dissociative disorders field. In some ways it is reminiscent of the older "oral literature" of our field from the years before *DISSOCIATION* provided a forum for communicating advances, and before mainstream journals would accept most papers about the dissociative disorders. Clinicians and scholars are putting their heads together trying to understand and treat this challenging group of patients, and to conceptualize and comprehend dissociative phenomena. Those in North America and around the world who have little personal access to others with an interest in the field can move from isolation into an electronic community of colleagues with similar concerns. My only misgivings about the discussion group, apart from the occasional excesses I consider inevitable in any group situation, relate to my strong impression that some of those who contribute to the discussion group use it as a substitute for reading and mastering the literature. Using the discussion group for that purpose holds the potential to pave a royal road to self-deception.

I hope readers of *DISSOCIATION* who are eligible to participate in the Dissociative Disorders Discussion Group will consider subscribing and contributing. The dissociative disorders field owes Dr. Barach a debt of gratitude for his diligent and sustained efforts.

For more information about the Dissociative Disorders

Discussion Group please contact Peter M.M. Barach, Ph.D., at Horizons Counseling Services, 5851 Pearl Road, Suite 305, Parma Heights, Ohio 44130, or by e-mail at this address: (pbarach@sprynet.com).

This issue of *DISSOCIATION* brings together a diverse group of contributions. Kumar, Pekala, and Marcano study the relationships among hypnotizability, dissociativity, and phenomenological experience. They demonstrate that dissociativity and hypnotizability are different constructs with a modest relationship, but that subjects in whom both traits are high are most likely to experience the type of trance achieved by the most highly hypnotizable subjects.

Segall offers a provocative essay on metaphors of agency and mechanism in dissociation, and his thoughts are discussed by Watkins, Cardena, and van der Hart.

Jacobs and Bovasso offer an analysis of depersonalization and explain several forms of depersonalization experience. Their findings suggest that depersonalization is a multidimensional construct; they hypothesize that the distinctions they draw may have considerable clinical relevance.

Gangdev and Matjane describe dissociative phenomenology and dissociative disorders in a Black South African population. Their case studies are among the first reports of such phenomena in this population. From Japan comes the work of Umesue, Matsuo, Iwata, and Tashiro, who validated a Japanese version of the DES of Bernstein and Putnam (1986), and describe 19 cases of dissociative disorder, one of which was dissociative identity disorder. The study of dissociation and the dissociative disorders is gaining momentum in Japan.

Moise and Leichner, from Canada, studied the prevalence of dissociative symptoms and disorders in a schizophrenic population. They found a considerable proportion of schizophrenics scored highly on several DES subscales, and raise interesting questions for future exploration. Somer and Weiner, from Israel, closely scrutinized the adolescent diaries of a small number of dissociative disorder patients and others. They found dissociative themes were present many years before dissociative disorders were diagnosed, and argue that this is evidence that such symptoms cannot be said to appear invariably *de novo* in therapy. Finally, Williams and Gindelsperger describe their experience in creating and maintaining a psychoeducational group for dissociative patients.

The first group of papers presented at the 1995 Spring Meeting of the ISSD in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, will be featured in the December issue of *DISSOCIATION*.

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REFERENCES

- Bernstein, E., & Putnam, F.W. (1986). Development, reliability, and validity of a dissociation scale. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 174, 727-735.