

“Multiple Systems” versus Dissociative Identity Disorder: Life-Style or Mental Illness?

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With the popularization of the Internet within the last twenty years, and its increasing use as a forum for nameless individuals to voice thoughts they would otherwise keep private, many groups have risen out of anonymity. Utilizing various blogging platforms and social media, these fringe groups are attempting to normalize their behavior by commiserating with similar individuals.

One such group calls themselves “multiple systems” or “plural people.”<sup>1</sup> According to *Astraea’s Web (2007)*, an online collection of information regarding this mental state, multiplicity is defined as “Two or more independent people who use the same body; the experience of sharing the body with others.” Essentially, in a similar way that the majority of people experience a single consciousness in their single body, a multiple system experiences at least one other additional, complete, and independent consciousness who may or may not share control of the physical body. It differs from the traditional definition of Dissociative Identity Disorder in that the individual insists they are consciously aware of the world while their other identities are present, or “fronting” (DSM-IV, 2006; *Astraea’s, 2007*). The number of individuals a person might claim to have sharing their body varies, but the number is typically greater than two (*Astraea’s, 2007*).

This research paper will operate under the following assumptions. While Dissociative Identity Disorder and Multiplicity have existed as psychological concepts for many years, the present research paper intends to focus on the modern adolescents who choose to share their lives via internet blogging platforms such as Tumblr and Blogspot. Additionally, much debate

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<sup>1</sup> “Systems,” “plurals,” and “multiples” will be used throughout this paper when referring to individuals experiencing this psychological classification.

exists about the validity of DID as a psychological diagnosis, but this research paper will assume that these adolescents at least believe themselves to be a part of multiple systems, and thus whether they are legitimately sharing a physical body with distinct personalities or are merely experiencing psychosis does not negate the need to examine their lifestyle. Because of the multiple systems community's belief that their experiences are normal, and their apparent ability to function intelligently and independently, it is important to examine whether plurality is merely a subsection of dissociative identity disorder and should therefore be considered a dangerous psychological illness, or whether it is a harmless alternative mental state.

In a multiple system, different identities inhabit the same body, but all share the body's experiences. The identities within the system may be different genders and ages, and may have distinct sexual preferences and behaviors (Astraea's, 2007). Multiple systems typically give their set of identities a name, such as The JC Klatch. The JC Klatch shares their experiences via their blog, Publically Plural, and website, The JC Klatch. The system consists of nine individuals sharing the 29 year-old female body of Jennifer Lee Combies. Personalities include Miakoda, described as a Wiccan, homosexual little girl that enjoys the color pink. Compare this to the identity named 17, a seven-year old boy created by Jennifer's therapist to control Katelynn, an easily upset toddler known for her public tantrums. Combies insists she does not have any type of psychological disorder, and that her ability to slip in and out of these different identities is natural, normal, and right<sup>2</sup> (Combies, M., 2011). The Aqua Vita Collective's Tumblr blog describes themselves as consisting of three identities, all female, inhabiting a

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<sup>2</sup> Two works of Combies will be cited in this paper; one written by Jennifer, the other written by her identity as Miakoda. Jennifer's text will be cited as (Combies, J., 2011) and Miakoda's text as (Combies, M., 2011).

transgendered male 16 year-old body. Kit, a 19 year old female, writes that another child sexually abused them when they were 8, while the other two younger identities do not claim to have experienced the assault (Aqua, 2012). Ostensibly, they may have developed or been created as a result of that experience.

The previously referenced blogs, as well as a review of results after entering “multiplicity” as a search term into Tumblr, revealed that many multiple systems experience one or more forms of psychological disorders. Many claim to be survivors of sexual or physical abuse, to habitually visit therapy, and to have experimented with self-harm (Combies, J., 2011; Aqua, 2012; Shadow, 2012, Vincent 2010).

The scientific validity of these blogs is obviously questionable, but their review is necessary because of the fact that few, if any, scholarly papers examining multiplicity as these systems experience it. The reviewed literature studies dissociative identity states, which are different from the simultaneous experiences claimed by many systems. However, because of the similarities between the two states: psychological trauma, multiple identities, and presently experienced depression and anxiety, relationships can be drawn between those claiming to live as part of multiple systems of people and those suffering from dissociative identity disorder.

For his master’s dissertation, Christian Vincent (2010) interviewed several patients diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder as well as their psychologists. In his interviews, many patients confessed to experiencing deep psychological trauma as children. His findings are in line with many researchers’ conclusions that identities are created as a way for children to escape abuse (Pica, 1999). The interviewees described their personalities as having different jobs: one would “front” during pleasurable sexual activities, while the others would claim to

have experienced rape. Other personalities were used for jobs, school, and family interactions. Some admitted to actively integrating the identities of their abusers in their identity system, and still others insisted their many identities had existed since birth (Vincent, 2010). What must be noted about Vincent's research, however, is that the individuals all admitted to having violent, dissociative episodes, while those claiming to live as multiple systems do not admit to having such destructive behaviors. Vincent's individuals all declared that they saw themselves as having personalities, or personas, and at least one was able to fully integrate their personas back into one identity. Multiple systems insist that their identities are distinct individuals and are offended by the idea that they should integrate them, treating the idea as similar to murder (Astraea's, 2007).

Vincent's research makes an interesting parallel between his interviewees' identities and Jung's archetypes, most relevant to the relationship between the Shadow and child identities (Vincent, 2010). Of the reviewed blogs, most claimed to have at least one child personality who was easily frightened, scared of adults, distrusting of others, but still maintained a child-like innocence and behavior (Combies, J., 2011; Aqua, 2012, Shadow, 2012). This identity, if created, may represent a victim identity, separate from the rest of the system to help them deal with psychological trauma, which often occurs in early childhood (Pica, 1999). When Vincent asked his interviewees if they might relate their child personas with a description of Jung's Shadow, many agreed to the relationship (Vincent, 2010).

Much of the academic literature about DID examine the validity of those who claim to experience multiple identities or dissociative states. Nicholas Spanos, Professor of Psychology and Director of the Laboratory for Experimental Hypnosis at Carleton University, explored the

idea that “multiple personality disorder” (as it was termed in 1994) is a social construction. He cited the prevalence and concentration of diagnosis in North America within the last twenty years, as movies and the media sensationalized the concept of multiple personalities, as well as the predisposition of cases to psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression resulting from trauma. When these individuals, whose identities are already weak, see people with dissociative identity disorder being glorified, they may match their own problems against the constructed idea of the disorder they see in films (Spanos, 1994). Spanos’s point is valid, particularly given this paper’s examination of impressionable young people seeking attention. Claiming to live as part of a multiple system of identities creates a sort of celebrity status; anyone they come into contact with must immediately be educated on the exceptionalism of the individuals and must accommodate their personalities in order to successfully interact.

In fact, related research examined by Brenneis (1996) concludes that those diagnosed with DID were statistically more susceptible to suggestion and hypnotic states. These individuals also required a very trusting relationship with their therapist and the researcher before they were willing to reveal details about their other identities. Therapists then had to probe for revelation, and such techniques, combined with their patient’s predisposition towards fantasy states, may lead to the patients’ believing in their own psychosis. Such findings of secrecy conflict with the ready openness of Vincent’s (2010) interviews. However, they willingly admitted that they suffered from a disorder and were able to integrate their identities.

In additional contrast, more recent research demonstrates that fantasy-proneness is not empirically related to dissociation. Dalenberg, Brand, Gleaves, Dorahy, Loewenstein, Cardeña, & Spiegel, (2012) realized a negative relationship between fantasy-proneness and dissociative

behavior and invented memory. Instead, traumatic events in one's past highly predicted a person's tendency to exhibit dissociative behavior. Separate research by Reinders, Willemsen, Vos, Der Boer, & Nijenhuis (2012) found similar results. The study examined 28 DID patients, exposing 11 to high fantasy stimulation, 10 to no stimulation, and 8 to low fantasy stimulation. The study concluded that DID states were induced just as often among the three groups, thus concluding that fantasy stimulation played no part in triggering a dissociative state.

The differences between dissociative identity disorder and those claiming to live in multiple systems are thus extremely blurred. Although claiming to live functional and productive lives, most multiples experience depression and anxiety, and previous experienced some sort of psychological trauma. That trauma commonly results in dissociative states (Pica, 1999). Michael Pica's article "The evolution of alter personality states in dissociative identity disorder" reviews much of the established literature on DID, and suggests that "alters" evolve out of the identities traumatized children created to distance themselves from disturbing events. Such children lack stable, soothing caregivers to help them differentiate their internal identities from their real one. Having to rely on their created identities for relief may eventually result in those identities manifesting as part of their consciousness to act as caregivers, perhaps to the Shadow identity created in direct response to trauma (Pica, 1999, Vincent 2010). Essentially, imaginary friends created to comfort the child become their only source of security, and so to maintain that security, the child absorbs that imaginary friend into their own character.

The majority of psychologists recommend, above all else, that the separate identities be integrated, which, as stated previously, constitute murder to a multiple system. Pica suggests examining the types of "altars" present in the system, and addressing the cognitive distress they

reveal (Pica, 1999). For example, a person with many sexual identities may have been subjected to repeated rape, and so that trauma must be discovered and dealt with. Having examined 36 experts in DID treatment, Brand et al. estimates that the best agreed upon method is a three stage approach. The first stage focuses on teaching the individual emotional control and stability, or how to avoid violent, manic, or harmful behaviors resulting from dissociation. The second recommended stage uses trauma-focused cognitive therapy with each individual identity, and the third state seeks to unify the identities, though, Brand emphasizes, such unification of extreme DID cases is extremely rare (Brand et al., 2012).

Patricia Hernandez (2010) poses a question about modern identity in her article “Multiplicity and Identity Mitigation in Video Games,” about what it means to have an identity in a modern world. Using video games as an example, Hernandez describes how the internet enables people to display different personas on the internet, with no one able to know which is the true “root identity” due to the anonymous nature of the internet.

Specifically in video games such as Mass Effect, the player defines the traits of the character according to the player’s choices, thus creating an identity separate from their selves, although she ultimately concludes that video games do not explore identity as much as they someday could (2010). In the online age, it is very simple to create an identity in one online forum that is completely different the identity used in another, with no one the wiser. That ease of transition explains why these young adults are so open about their identities, which inspire so much confusion in common populations.

After reviewing the available literature and anecdotal evidence, the core difference between DID and multiplicity lies in the lack of true dissociation, but that is not enough to

separate multiplicity from a harmful psychological disorder. According to their blogs, none of the multiple systems claim to experience periods of black outs common with people who have DID. However, because no formal empirical studies have been performed, it is difficult to definitively separate it from dissociative identity disorder. Multiple systems are high-functioning, but still attend therapy for depression and anxiety. Both claim, or definitively have been subjected, to early traumatic sexual assault, which has been shown to be one of the primary, if not the only, cause of dissociative identity disorder. In addition, multiple systems tend to have at least one small child identity that serves to be the victim of that sexual abuse. Further research is required to decide once and for all if multiple systems are in fact a legitimate form of alternative mental living, but for now one should not differentiate it from dissociative identity disorder.

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