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Unity and Multiplicity in Hypnosis, Commissurotomy, and Multiple Personality Disorder

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This paper examines the question of whether multiple personalities are multiple persons, that is, multiple selves within a single body. It reviews evidence from hypnosis literature which seems to suggest that disunified states of co-consciousness may characterize all persons. This is related to neuropsychological and philosophical discussions of split-brain patients and clinical aspects of multiple personality patients. It is argued that in some fundamental ways both multiple personalities and split-brain patients can be seen as single selves even though they do not always experience such unity. The mechanisms of their unity of self are clinically identified and contrasted to those operating in normal persons. It is also argued that unity of self is consistent with a degree of disunity of consciousness and this is discussed as it occurs in both normals and multiples. Clinical implications for the treatment of multiple personality disorder are also briefly identified.

The concept of a unified self is fundamental to a host of moral, legal and religious concepts as well as serving as a basic assumption of our everyday interactions with each other. Multiple personalities present a challenge to this ordinary, taken-for-granted assumption. To many observers, the plurality of personalities seems to require positing a plurality of selves. Multiple personalities then are seen as multiple persons or selves cohabiting a single body.

The philosophical problems posed by multiple personalities are in some respects paralleled by the discussion as to whether "split-brain" patients have two minds.[1] Sperry's studies of commissurotomy patients lead him to argue

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[1]Although it is recognized that "mind" and "self" are not identical concepts, they are closely connected. Roughly, a "mind" is the possessor of psychological states (beliefs, moods, emotions, etc.), while a "self" is a responsible agent. It is inconceivable that one could be the latter without being or having the former. Hence in this paper the concepts are used interchangeably.

that split-brain persons have two conscious streams of experience and therefore two minds (Sperry, 1977). Co-consciousness seemed to him to be incompatible with the assertion that such a patient remained a single person or self.

Other theorists have taken this assumption that a disunity of consciousness is incompatible with a singleness of self or personhood and, pointing to such disunities in all persons, have suggested that ordinary humans may have more than one self or mind. Puccetti (1973) argues this on the basis of the similarities between split-brain patients and normals. Beahrs (1982) makes this argument on the basis of the similarities between multiple personality patients and normals.

The thesis of the present paper is that unity of self is consistent with a degree of disunity of consciousness and that both commissurotomy and multiple personality patients should be viewed as persons with single selves. Upon careful examination, the similarities between normals and multiples employed by Beahrs to argue that normals are really multiple selves can be employed to show that multiple personalities are still in some respects a unified self. Further, the kinds of functional integration which Marks (1980) employs to argue that split-brain patients have one mind or self can be used to argue for a degree of unity among multiples.

Before further developing this thesis it may be helpful to review the evidence which seems to suggest that disunity of consciousness is characteristic of all persons, not just multiples and commissurotomy patients. This will be followed by a review of evidence which supports the claim that multiple personality individuals do in fact possess a degree of integration which provides some basis for viewing them as persons with single selves.

Multiplicity in Unity

Several lines of research have recently converged to suggest that all individuals may have several simultaneous states of co-consciousness. The point made by researchers is that what we experience as unconscious, or beyond awareness, is really conscious for some other part of our personality. This was suggested many years ago when Lundeholm (1928) studied hypnotically induced deafness and noted that it could be eliminated by a verbal cue. Obviously some part of the person had to be "hearing" everything, even while the rest of the personality was apparently hearing nothing; otherwise the auditory cue to restore normal hearing would not itself have been heard. This fact was noted by Lundeholm but was not systematically studied until much more recently.

Orne (1959) set out to exhaustively compare the behavior of highly hypnotizable subjects who were hypnotized with that of non-hypnotizable subjects who were not hypnotized but were instructed to behave as if they were.

The most consistent difference between the two groups was a type of internal logic, called "trance logic," which was possessed by subjects who were actually hypnotized. One example of this trance logic is the differential response of the two groups to a negative hallucination. Subjects were given the suggestion that on opening their eyes, they would not see a certain individual standing in the room. When a third individual was positioned directly behind the "invisible" person and the subject was asked to walk to him, the simulator did as would be expected of one who believed that he should not be seeing the "invisible" person, bumping into him. In contrast, the hypnotized sybject who did not see the second person, walked around the obstacle, often giving some rationalization for the staggering or circuitous walk and giving every appearance of not seeing what must have actually been seen at another level or by another part of personality.

This phenomenon has been most carefully investigated by Hilgard (1977). Studying hypnotically induced blindness and deafness, Hilgard refers to that part of self which sees or hears—even when the rest of personality is blind or deaf—as the "hidden observer." He also demonstrated the phenomenon in the kinaesthetic sense, asking individuals under hypnosis if any part of their personality experienced the pain of the hypnotically anesthetized "subject" exposed to painful stimuli. What he found was a "part-self" which could describe the pain and which described itself as being fully conscious during the experience. Reports of numerous hypnotists who have had subjects describe their experience during surgery under conventional anesthetics suggest that hidden observers are operative, not just during hypnotically induced states.

Watkins and Watkins (1979) explored the hidden observer phenomenon still further. Working with college volunteers they induced hypoanesthesia and then administered a painful stimulus. They then asked to speak with any part of the self which may have experienced the pain. They also asked this part his or her name and explored self perceptions as well as perceptions of the main personality. This line of exploration allowed for the identification of a number of ego states in each subject. Rather emphatically Watkins and Watkins concluded that we are all latent multiple personalities in that all persons seem to have more than one simultaneously conscious personality, each with its own subjective experience, feelings, and thoughts.

Beahrs (1982) argues that these and related findings necessitate viewing the self not as a single entity but as a hierarchical organization of part-selves, what might be viewed as a self system. Furthermore, equating consciousness with awareness, he argues that the unconscious is the collection of parts of the individual's mind of which the usual self is not aware. However, since these parts have their own consciousness, they are unconscious only from the perspective of the usual self. Other parts of self may be fully conscious of these so-called "unconscious" experiences, as for example in the reports of

hidden observers contacted through hypnosis. This means that what we experience as a single stream of consciousness may actually just be the proverbial tip of the iceberg; co-consciousness may characterize us all.

Organizing these multiple levels of consciousness is what Beahrs calls the executive self. This is compared to the conductor of an orchestra, the orchestra being the other part-selves. Typically, the other part-selves have a two-way information exchange with each other and with the usual self—when they become dominant the switch is experienced as ego syntonic. Beahrs suggests that we often go through such a switch when we switch roles, as for example when the doctor leaves the office and enters his or her home. On some occasions the executive self temporarily allows a part-self, which is not a well integrated member of the self system, to become dominant. In such a situation this part-self may have a one-way amnestic barrier between itself and the constellation of other part-selves in the self system. It would, therefore, be unknown to the usual self, although it may have partial or total awareness of the usual self. At these points the executive self functions as the hidden observer, continuing to monitor behavior even if temporarily abdicating one of the conductor's normal responsibilities, that is, control of the body.

Can a Unified Self Have a Disunified Consciousness?

The above model is used by Beahrs to argue that all persons are multiple selves. The underlying assumption of such an argument seems to be that disunity of consciousness implies disunity of mind. However, this principle needs to be critically examined. Perhaps a disunified consciousness still may be said to possess a unified mind. Marks (1980) has argued this point in the case of split-brain patients. While he recognizes that if the disunity becomes too great then the case for one mind is lost, his defense of the principle that a single mind can have a disunified consciousness implies that it is not self-evident that multiple personalities have more than one mind. It is rather an issue to be debated, and both conceptual and empirical evidence will be relevant to the debate.

Marks' argument for the principle under discussion relies, of course, on his view of "mind." Marks rejects the Cartesian view of mind as "that of which one is capable of being introspectively aware" in favor of the view that a mind is something attributed to an entity to explain its behavior. To attribute a mind to some one is roughly to attribute to them "a network of interacting internal states, which are largely, but not exclusively, specified by our names for propositional attitudes, e.g., memory, belief, desire, intention" (Marks, 1980, p. 34). Although he does not imply that in introspection we are not normally aware of our minds, he does imply that mind cannot simply be equated with conscious states. Marks' view has the merit of being able to make sense of findings of depth psychology since it clearly implies that one can have beliefs,

hopes, fears, of which one is not conscious.

If a view such as Marks' is accepted, then one might distinguish between unity of mind and unity of mental functioning. Split-brain patients can thus be viewed as people whose minds temporarily function in a disunified manner. Consciousness is here seen, not as the essence of mind, but as one of the functions of mind. Rather than viewing the mind as a succession of conscious states (Hume, 1739/1888), or as a set of such states related by memory (Locke, 1694/1964), the mind is the entity which *has* the conscious experiences, which represent its manner of functioning.

It is important to see that this view of mind is compatible with a strong view of the person as a self or responsible agent. Thus, a traditional theorist like Campbell (1957), a classic defender of the view that the self is a unified agent which is not reducible to a set of experiences or relations of experiences, claims that a unified self can be disunified in function. Campbell specifically considers the issue of multiple personality, and argues that, far from having multiple selves, the multiple has one self which is functioning in a dissociated manner, through the same kinds of dissociative mechanisms which are at work in ordinary people.

Unity in Multiplicity

Beahrs argues from the similarity of multiples and normals that all persons are multiple selves. However, following the lead of Campbell, his argument can also be taken in reverse to argue that multiple personalities can be seen to possess a unified single self if we are willing to distinguish the self from those conscious experiences which may be said to represent its functioning. Multiples may not consciously experience the unity of self in the way non-multiples do, but such unity may in fact exist.

The substantial differences which are typically present between the various subpersonalities of a multiple may at first seem to be incompatible with such an assertion. For even if a unified self is compatible with some degree of disunity of consciousness, it is plausible that it is not compatible with any and every type of disunity. Sutcliffe and Jones (1963) reported that the personalities in a multiple typically differ in terms of self concept, mood, attitudes, interests, aesthetic tastes, values, physiological responses, and propriety of behavior. Greaves (1980) adds to this list sexual orientation, youthfulness, gender, and psychiatric diagnosis. Furthermore, the phenomenological report of the alter personalities tends to reinforce the tendency to see the individual as a body inhabited by multiple persons. The alter personalities view each other as separate from each component personality as well as from the main personality. They also typically see themselves and each other in bodies that correspond to their ages. Is there then any basis for viewing multiple personalities as having a single self?

Careful observation of the multiple's functioning as well as attention to their self report suggests a degree of unity which may justify the postulation of a single self. This unity is not experienced as a single personality but is represented in what is sometimes described by the alter personalities as something similar to a family council. This governance body may or may not involve all personalites; some personalities may be excluded for being untrustworthy, too unstable, or too young. The group does, however, typically play an executive role in the system, making all major decisions. To be sure, the metaphor of the family council may suggest plurality rather than unity. But the point is that there is a degree of harmony and unity in the functioning of the multiple. The functioning is not totally disunified.

The fact that multiples frequently cope quite successfully in vocational and domestic responsibilities also suggests a coordination of parts similar to what Beahrs has called the executive self. Most multiples have a well-worked-out system of rules and roles developed by the internal governance council to ensure coping. Such rules typically prescribe such things as which personality has responsibility for performing vocational tasks, which personality handles domestic tasks, who drives the car, who ensures that medications are taken, who handles the finances, and a host of other details. Such well-worked-out rules frequently allow multiples to hold very responsible professional positions while their multiplicity may go completely undetected by those around them. It is precisely such a coordinated set of beliefs, attitudes, and other mental functions, which according to Marks, provides the basis for our usual ascription of a unified mind to other people.

Another line of evidence suggesting that there is a coordinated self system in multiples similar to that posited by Beahrs as existing in normals concerns the similarities that exist among the alter personalities. One consequence of the prevailing professional scepticism regarding the legitimacy of multiple personality disorders is that the authors describing the disorder have been literally forced to focus on the differences among the various personalities in order to gain acceptance for the diagnosis. This has had the unfortunate consequence of often creating the impression that the individual is several completely different and autonomous individuals, all inhabiting one body. This caricature has resulted in a bias: few professionals notice the relationship among the part-selves, or, what Gruenewald (1977) has described as the common substrate of personality which is shared between the alter personalities. When one asks not "how are the parts different from each other?" but "how are they similar?" or "in what way may they be seen as fragments of a larger and more inclusive whole?", striking similarities among component personalities are noted. Such perceptions were reported by Thigpen and Cleckley (1954) who, in their description of Eve, noted that while the handwriting of the three personalities looked distinctly different, a handwriting analysis conducted by an expert revealed that the samples were written by

the same person. Employing more standardized and valid instruments Wagner and Heise (1974) documented important basic similarities in personality structure of multiples using the Rorschach, while Brandsma and Ludwig (1974) did the same with a battery of psychological and physiological tests. It should be noted that these findings were not incompatible with the diagnosis of multiple personality; in fact, the Brandsma and Ludwig study is frequently cited as one of the best available objective documentations of the legitimacy of the disorder. Ironically, while setting out to document the differences among personalities, these authors and others were impressed by the similarities.

Clinical Implications

An understanding of the fundamental unity of selfhood that exists under the more apparent diversity of personalities in the multiple can protect the clinician from further reinforcing the fragmentation which exists. One way in which this can be done is not to accept the multiple's language of different persons living within the same body but to talk of parts of self which may be unknown to the rest of self but which *are* self. This process of teaching the main personality to view the disorder more ego syntonically is often a long and difficult one, but when it is accomplished treatment moves much easier and faster. The alter personalities must also be involved in the treatment process; clinicians may actually need to explain to the alter personalities that while they may not *feel* as if they are a part of the main personality, or it a part of them, this is in fact true. The issue then becomes the dysfunctional consequences of autonomous, non-cooperative existence, rather than a basic right to existence. This diffuses much of the inevitable resistance encountered with the alter personalities who perceive therapy as directed toward their death.

Related to this approach, treatment must not focus on specific alter personalities or even upon the main personality but rather upon the whole person viewed as a system. The goal of eliminating the psychopathology of any one of the alter personalities may be counterproductive to the goal of helping the whole person—the dissociated fragment of personality may inadvertently be made more autonomous.

Part-selves must be involved in the treatment process. Since the overall treatment focus must be the person or system as a whole it is sometimes useful to conceptualize treatment as family systems therapy rather than individual therapy. Here the goal is the alteration of the system of relationships existing among the parts. More specifically, this involves the attempt to sufficiently break down the amnestic barriers to allow for communication and cooperation between all parts of the system. This overall strategy can represent a first step to the more ambitious goal of complete integration of the fragments, fusing them into some new composite personality, or, if this goal seems to not

be feasible, improved cooperation between the personalities. It must be recognized, however, that the goal of complete integration presupposes that the thesis of this paper is correct—that multiple personalities in some sense are a single self. As Campbell (1957) noted, it is hard to see how two personalities could be integrated if they belonged to two separate entities, nor why they should be.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that multiple personalities can be most pragmatically viewed as a composite single self. The fact that this underlying unity of self is not experienced by the individual, a result of the dissociation or amnestic barrier between some parts of experience and the rest of the personality, should not be taken as a trustworthy indication of the absence of a single self.

Perhaps it would be useful to distinguish between a minimal and a maximal sense of unity of self. The minimal sense of self, in which even multiples may be said to be a single self, involves the self as an entity which has, or functions through, various conscious states which are more or less coordinated. Unity of self at this minimal level may be described as unity of personhood. It requires only the minimal degree of functional unity which is necessary to postulate a single mind.

The maximal notion of a unified self may be best understood as unity of personality. This is not something which results simply from *being* a self, but is an *achievement* of self. Not only multiples fail to achieve unity in this maximal sense: unity of personality is an achievement which even normal people do not usually (or ever) fully actualize. The failure to achieve this unity is most spectacular in multiple personality disorders because the various unintegrated fragments of personality are split off from the main personality and sometimes from each other. However, the differences between multiples and normals is nevertheless one of degree, and the differences do not require one to postulate a plurality of selves in a multiple personality.

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