Multiple Personality Disorder: Fact or Fiction?

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Imagine a situation where two good friends, Kyle and Trent, are hanging out. Nothing out of the ordinary, no worries or troubles, just a normal day. Suddenly, Kyle begins to act differently, becoming irritable or upset, leaving Trent to wonder what is going on. When Trent tries to help, Kyle lashes out violently, as if he had the mind of a ruthless mercenary. Trent cries out his name, begging him to stop. Kyle then looks at him as if he was talking to a complete stranger and tells Trent that he is someone else. Trent leaves for a period of time, only to return to find Kyle seemingly back to normal. Trent asks him if he remembers anything about what happened earlier, seeking an explanation for the behavior. Kyle looks at him with confusion and says how he can’t recall what happened, as if he weren’t even there to begin with. Trent may never know what happened to Kyle, but one thing remained clear. Kyle had demonstrated something Trent had never seen before, as if he had two distinct personalities. For years, one disorder has left psychologists stunned and confused, making them question their very own techniques and methods for curing it. What kind of disorder would leave trained and well-educated doctors of psychology in such a state? The answer is Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD) or medically known as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). In order to properly understand this disorder, it is important to understand what MPD is, the history behind it, and the controversy surrounding it.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, “Dissociative Identity Disorder is the presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states that recurrently take control of behavior” (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 526). This basically means that people who seem to experience two or more different personas are most likely diagnosed with multiple personality disorder. These personas can range from showing
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different emotional states to reveal even different versions of the person’s personality or character. With each person diagnosed with multiple personality disorder, the number and types of personas a person can exhibit can vary vastly. According to the article Multiple Personality Disorder: The Truth is Out There from New Scientist Magazine,

The number of personalities harbored by each patient grew, from an average of two per person, hovering for a while at 16 – Sybil’s tally – then swelling to 100 or more. These could include personalities of the opposite sex, animals – in one case a lobster.

(Waterhouse, 2013, para. 11)

The whole concept of multiple personality disorder is nearly impossible to comprehend. The idea of someone who could exhibit some alternate form of himself or herself, hidden deep in the crevices of his or her mind, is practically science-fiction. Even though the idea of Multiple Personality Disorder or Dissociative Identity Disorder is difficult to comprehend, it is considered a very real condition in the world of psychology.

Many scientists believe multiple personality disorder is nothing more than an overactive state of imagination formed from the advisement of uneducated therapists. During therapy sessions, therapists are able to allow their patients to open expose themselves for advice and closure, leaving their patients open to suggestion. This window of suggestion can give therapists the opportunity to plant memories into their patient’s mind, making the story seem like a real and precise memory, when in reality, it never really occurred. A prime example of this was seen through The Bugs Bunny Study conducted by Elizabeth Loftus, a psychologist at the University of California in Irvine. The study involved a theory that people could create false memories and mistake them for actual events. “Famously, Loftus got people to believe that they had met Bugs Bunny at Disneyland – impossible, since Bugs is a Warner Brothers character, not a Disney one”
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(Waterhouse, 2013, para. 15). The results of this experiment brought to light a big issue when it comes to diagnosing someone with multiple personality disorder. On the one hand, a person could seriously be ill and need proper medical as well as therapeutic treatment. On the other hand, the person could just be a victim of bad advice from a well-intended, but misguided therapist, who may be seeking fame and publicity from this uncommon disorder. Whatever the case may be, each treatment presents a serious and psychological threat to the overall health and wellbeing of the patient’s mental state.

The signs and symptoms from which multiple personality disorder can originate from vary from one person to the next. In businesses like media and entertainment, the signs and symptoms of multiple personality disorder are often over-exaggerated to produce either a more effective story or to boost ratings for certain television shows. “The more bizarre the portrayal, the more it fascinates and tempts the viewers to tune in. Also, overstated portrayals make it obvious that a person has DID” (Tartakovsky, 2007, para. 7). Despite the manipulative nature of news and entertainment, the recognized signs and symptoms of multiple personality disorder have some similarities to their over-stated versions. According to John Hayes, a man with over 30 years of practice in the field of psychology, “In terms of its classification, there are essentially 5 types of symptoms: Hallucinations, Delusions, Speech Anomalies, Dysfunctional Behavior Change, and Negative Symptomology” (Hayes, 2014, p. 29).

Essentially, hallucinations involve someone visually seeing something, in which no one else can see in plain sight. Delusions are beliefs or memories that a person creates from past experiences that never happened at all. The sign of a speech anomaly is when someone says something without actually understanding what they said until they say it on a frequent basis. When it comes to dysfunctional behavior change, this is often noticed by a sudden or continuous
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change in mood or behavior, without any affect from the surrounding environment the person is in. The last symptom of multiple personality disorder is negative symptomology. Negative symptomology is “referred to as the absence of normal behavior typified in non-affected individuals” (Hayes, 2014, p. 31).

With all these symptoms and theories revolving around multiple personality disorder, how is it still considered one the most inconclusive disorders in existence? Most likely it is how the disorder came to light in the first place. In the early 1900s, the possibility of someone having a multiple personality disorder was considerably rare and unheard of. Then in 1973, a book titled *Sybil* was published, revealing the disorder to the world. “Billed as the true story of a woman with 16 personalities, *Sybil* was later made into a highly enjoyable film starring Sally Field. The movie was, by some estimates, seen by a fifth of the US population” (Waterhouse, 2013, para. 7). The story of *Sybil* rapidly spread the idea that child abuse could lead to multiple personalities, thus increasing the awareness of the disorder. As time passed, the number of reported multiple personality disorder cases grew significantly. “Between 1980 and 1998, there were 40,000 reported cases of MPD in the US alone. That compares with fewer than 200 cases ever reported worldwide before *Sybil* appeared” (Waterhouse, 2013, para. 10). In 2011, it was revealed by Shirley Mason, the real Sybil, that *Sybil* was never really about an individual who had a multiple personality disorder, but was about a mentally unstable patient who was exploited by her therapist and a journalist, who were both eagerly searching for publicity. This discovery which led psychologists to question how valid this disorder really was and how effective their methods were in treating it.

The discovery of the *Sybil* scam unleashed a national witch hunt, targeting suspicious therapists and psychologists. One suspicious practice involves therapists who tried to aid people,
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who were diagnosed with the disorder through the use of hypnosis to tap into repressed memories however, “compelling research has shown that ‘experiences recalled under hypnosis can feel very true,’ even though the person never experienced these events” (Tartakovsky, 2011, para. 21). With one method of treating multiple personality disorder in question, a variety of different questions and regulations were put into place, putting the very practice of psychology in jeopardy. The development of therapists creating false memories in their patients lead to countless law suits, costing millions of dollars in compensation. “The first groundbreaking case involved Minnesota psychiatrist Diane Humenansky, who had diagnosed a patient with MPD caused by childhood sexual abuse. The patient received over $2 million after the jury concluded that the memories were false” (Waterhouse, 2013 para. 33).

Despite the continuous discoveries and scandals revolving around it, many experts still believe that multiple personality disorder is as legitimate as any other mental disorder. The history and portrayal of the disorder makes it hard to determine whether or not it is fact or fiction, but aren’t the greatest discoveries ones that toil in criticism and doubt, only to be realized as pure truth? Author Chuck Palahniuk once said in his novel Invisible Monsters, “Our real discoveries come from chaos, from going to the place that looks wrong and stupid and foolish” (1999, p. 258). If what Palahniuk said is true, then the very chaos and contradictions about multiple personality disorder would be worth it in the end. All the scams and confusion outlining the disorder would have been a lesson to, not only psychologists, but to everyone who had been confused or unaware of it. With everything that has been presented about multiple personality disorder, one question still remains. Is this, in fact, a legitimate disorder that produces various personas and identities or is it just a scam created for fame and publicity? Could what had happened between Trent and Kyle be blamed on this elusive disorder? Due to
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the contradicting nature and evidence found, the answer is inconclusive. There may come a day where this disorder is accepted and properly researched through the use of psychologists and doctors, but so long as there is fear and doubt, the understanding of multiple personality disorder may never be resolved. As J.K. Rowling (2000) once said, in her novel Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, "Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery" (p. 680).
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References


