

## **THE SPECTRUM OF DISSOCIATION: FROM PATHOLOGY TO SELF-REALIZATION**

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**ABSTRACT:** This article introduces a model for the classification of dissociative events based on the theory that dissociation is an inherent capability that can be used for expansion or constriction of self-concept, depending upon intent. By providing simple constructs for understanding and comparing complex and diverse phenomena, the model facilitates inquiry into the nature of human development. Through accommodating phenomena that are pathological and nonpathological, mundane and exceptional, the model permits the merging of psychological, philosophical, and spiritual inquiries. The author proposes that the ultimate goal of life-enhancing dissociative processes is the establishment of states of association in which awareness encompasses both physical and nonphysical reality simultaneously. Use of the model in therapeutic settings may aid both the healing of unproductive dissociation and the encouragement of dissociation that is in the service of wholeness.

Dissociation, a construct with myriad definitions, in every case addresses fragmentation or compartmentalization such that some aspect of an individual's stream of consciousness is lost to awareness. Across time, our approach to dissociation has been directly related to our changing views of association, which, in a broad sense, refers to the connectedness and interaction of events and processes within awareness.

In its earliest conceptualizations, the doctrine of association primarily addressed the mechanism of memory (van der Hart & Friedman, 1989; Wright, 1997). Memories were thought to arise through the association, or the binding together, of ideas. Using this conceptualization of association, dissociation referred to psychopathological processes that rendered memories unavailable to awareness. As emphasis was placed on the association of more constituents of self such as affect, sensations, and behavior, use of the term dissociation broadened to include everyday phenomena such as "driving on automatic pilot," and models and continuums of dissociation arose that address both "pathological" and "normal" dissociation (Braun, 1988; Cardeia, 1994; Kihlstrom, 1994; Watkins & Watkins, 1996). More recently, experiences that bring glimpses of connectedness between the personal self and the cosmos have been considered associative (White, 1997). Consequently, identifying solely with one's individuality or experiencing a temporary loss of identification with one's individuality while engrossed in nonordinary means of perception have both been considered dissociative.

Based on such broadened views of dissociation, Krippner (1997b) has formulated an elaborate classification system containing 10 categories that embrace both a variety of dissociative phenomena and shifts in awareness that may be mistaken for dissociation. Still, the need for a simple model that spans both sides of normal—the pathological and the exceptional—has yet to be fulfilled. The spectrum of dissociation

tion presented here provides a five-part model for classifying, comparing, and understanding relationships between pathological dissociative events, potentially life-enhancing dissociative events, and profound states of association.

#### BRIEF OVERVIEW

In agreement with Krippner (1997a) and White (1997), I propose that dissociation is an inherent capability that can be used for human growth or detriment. Dissociating from one aspect of self to assist the exploration of another, with the intention of integrating what has been experienced into the overall self-concept, can be developmentally advantageous. However, dissociation from our own inner fountain of energy, intelligence, creativity, and wisdom, coupled with dissociation from constituents of our mental and physical nature, may lead to pathologies of the self. Yet, because we are multifaceted, complex beings, it may not be possible to discover and unfold our full potential, to truly know the Self, without dissociative processes. Thus, a pattern of dissociation and integration can support both the development of individuality and the realization of the numinous that underlies, gives rise to, expresses through, and supports the individual being.

It is important to our understanding of human nature and to our personal journeys that we recognize that fragmentation can be in the service of wholeness. With this in mind, I define dissociation as the narrowing of awareness such that significant aspects or temporally relevant constituents of one's consciousness are excluded from self-concept, either temporarily or at length. Peripheral awareness may permit excluded material to be registered and/or available for scrutiny, but it is not attended to in the moment. The resultant phenomena can be pathological or nonpathological, detrimental or life enhancing.

Although recent theories have differentiated pathological and nonpathological dissociation, reserving the latter for categorizing states of high engrossment in an experience (Irwin, 1999), I have found it necessary to further delineate this construct to enable more specific classification of phenomena involving the narrowing of awareness. These delineations formulate the central part of the spectrum of dissociation and fall between pathological dissociation and association. Thus, the spectrum of dissociation comprises five constructs: pathological dissociation, typical dissociation, purposeful dissociation, directed dissociation, and association. By necessity, the spectrum includes association because eventually all types of dissociation can be abandoned in favor of a state of being where the collective whole of everything that transpires within one's consciousness is incorporated into self-concept, with its multifaceted constituents available for scrutiny when summoned.

The spectrum is not meant to be a linear representation of development, although a progressive tendency through the nonpathological segments and into the association segment is hypothesized. Such a progression may occur in the following way: inadvertent shifts of awareness (typical dissociation) might give rise to a desire to recreate similar experiences through the use of techniques created for that purpose. Subsequent practice (purposeful dissociation) may then open the ability to navigate

within the full realm of what is available to human awareness (directed dissociation). Integration of experiences gained in this way may create a habitual expansion of awareness, enabling it to embrace multidimensional constituents of self simultaneously (association).

Whether we are considering the progressive tendencies of nonpathological experiences along the spectrum or considering the spectrum's nonlinear nature, as exemplified by flashes of association that precipitate the seeking of purposeful or directed dissociation, viewing dissociative processes within this framework provides an understanding of how these processes can facilitate the unfolding of full human potential.

#### CLASSIFYING EXPERIENCES

As Cardeia (1997) has pointed out, from certain perspectives there is agreement that "to be human IS to live in a dissociated condition" (p. 61). It is not the purpose of the spectrum to address such a fundamental condition, thereby encompassing all human experience, but rather to address dissociative phenomena that significantly affect movement toward or away from full potential as described by self-realized individuals.

#### *Pathological Dissociation*

Pathological dissociation is the category for classifying dissociative phenomena that exclude compartmentalized fragments of the collective character, behaviors, temperaments, emotions, and mental traits of an individual from awareness such that awareness tends to shift between them rather than encompass them. Self-concept is not only limited but inconsistent. Quality of life clearly suffers when conditions such as multiple identities, confusion regarding self in the world, conversion symptoms, drunken stupor, or the arousal of violent rage are experienced. In such cases, the dynamic is to "not know" the whole of the individual self and its life experiences. Pathological dissociation leaves a wake of dullness, chaos, fear, or general havoc within the individual. These conditions are widely addressed in the literature.

An example of this type of dissociation and its potential is an event that occurred during a therapy session with a client suffering from panic attacks. As a particular situation was discussed, I noticed a far-away look in the eyes of Rhonda, accompanied by silence. Shortly thereafter, she appeared to be frozen in time. As we analyzed what was transpiring, we discovered that what Rhonda noticed first (though not necessarily what transpired first) was a sense of floating on waves moving out from the side of her head. Something subtle, presumably a somatic memory, seemed to have triggered a negative or defensive intent that subsequently propelled dissociation. This shifted Rhonda's perception from "I inhabit the body" to "I exist outside of the body," which she then interpreted as an indication that death was imminent: "**P**art of me is leaving my body, and therefore my physical being is seriously endangered." Panic ensued.

Without knowledge regarding her intent to escape what was transpiring in the domains of mind and body, and without clarity concerning where awareness was situated after redirecting its focus, Rhonda was left with a sense of no safe place to be. Proper guidance, including explanation and grounding techniques, rapidly resolved the situation, providing Rhonda with both the security and ability to be present to whatever material she chose to highlight.

Although Rhonda's attempt to avoid discomfort ultimately led to symptoms of anxiety, individuals who experience patterns of debilitating fragmentation sometimes move their awareness to a realm of consciousness that is peaceful, nurturing, vibrant, and orderly. In such cases, there is a collective compartmentalization of these qualities so that they have little or no relationship to other aspects of self. Comstock (1991) refers to this kind of fragmented part within those with dissociative disorders as the "Inner Self Helper": a source of inner guidance, inborn wisdom, and calm that is in need of fusion with other personality fragments (p. 165).

### *Typical Dissociation*

Typical dissociation is the category for normative dissociative phenomena in which awareness is narrowed to exclude some or much of what is transpiring in the moment within any aspect of being, including external situations and stimuli; internal sensations, thoughts, and memories; and other impulses from within or without. Such narrowing of awareness can be relatively inconsequential, can significantly inhibit movement toward wholeness, or can enhance the process of self-development.

Most of us have experienced selective listening, or driving a vehicle "on autopilot." When experienced in moderation, this type of event tends to be relatively inconsequential, but habitual patterns of nonpresence to the inner or outer world may become problematic. This is often seen in relation to feelings. The *intent* to "not know" is displayed whenever there is sincere inconsistency between an individual's introspective verbal report about what is believed to be transpiring within and what his or her physiology or behavior suggests. Epidermal responses, for example, may indicate the presence of strong arousal or anger while there is no corresponding verbal report or behavioral indication demonstrating this (Cardena, 1994). Similarly, a person may display calmness in speech and demeanor upon being criticized, with no awareness of the presence of strong emotion, while the body, oblivious to the fact that the emotions are dissociated from awareness, breaks out in a rash.

Absence of affect in emotional contexts is often facilitated by the use of cognitive defenses such as rationalization, intellectualization, or preoccupation with other cognitive processes. Frequently, such defenses are called upon to avoid trauma-related memories which, stored under extreme emotional conditions and therefore state dependent, might be elicited by environmental cues or by the experience of similar affect if cognitive defenses were to be set aside (Kirmayer, 1994). When propelled by the desire to step outside of what is occurring in the mental and physical worlds to avoid facing truth, typical dissociation often limits an individual's

repertoire of feelings and behaviors to a degree that affects the fullness, spontaneity, and joy of life.

Similarly, when we are not fully present to sensations within the body, to actions the body is performing, to what is occurring within our mental components, or to the qualities of consciousness that enhance our being, there is likely to be an inhibition of our liveliness and vibrancy. Consequently, we become "spaced out," unfocused, unproductive, distorted in our cognition, accident prone, forgetful, oblivious to arising feelings, and unaware of the richer mystery of consciousness.

There are, however, life-enhancing occurrences of typical dissociation. Focusing intensely on one activity to the exclusion of another because awareness is not yet able to accommodate both simultaneously can ultimately serve a greater wholeness. For example, when a musician is first learning to read an orchestral score, only one instrument's part can be followed, even though the sensory faculties may "see" all of the notes on the page and "hear" all of the sounds produced. The intensity of focus precludes the ability to recollect what transpired beyond the followed part. With diligent practice, however, awareness broadens, and eventually the musician becomes able to follow the entire score at once. Such synthesis is a developmental feat, and quite an impressive one, which could not have been accomplished without dissociative processes.

Two other types of typical dissociation can have an expansive impact: dissociation induced by extremely intense experiences, and gentle, inadvertent shifts of awareness. A rape victim observing the event from a distance, detached from emotions and physical sensations, exemplifies the first of these. Often, a sense of comfort is felt during the time of detachment. Although pulling awareness away from what is being registered in the mind and body prevents full realization of what is transpiring in the moment, when any nurturing or protective qualities of consciousness that were experienced during the dissociation are incorporated following the event, the necessary strength and clarity to assimilate the incident are provided. Working toward the integration of the entire experience invites the broadening of self-concept, enabling more of the self to become conscious. Without this depth of integration, patterns of pathological dissociation may develop.

The second of these types—gentle inadvertent shifts—frequently occurs with brilliant awareness. Such experiences with the numinous are difficult to ignore, even though some individuals may make a concerted effort to do so. These experiences, stumbled upon unexpectedly, include certain near-death experiences, sudden flashes of life beyond physical form that involve transcendence of time and space, and completely "losing oneself" in the glory of art or nature such that the potential for transformation is inherent in the experience. It is difficult to avoid being present to such experiences. Often, they are so powerful that they lead to a search for means to experience purposeful and directed dissociation (addressed next).

### *Purposeful Dissociation*

Purposeful dissociation is the category for classifying deliberately produced dissociative phenomena that temporarily free awareness from the activities of the mind and body, thereby enabling the individual to focus beyond these boundaries. In the healthiest of circumstances, these experiences are born of a sincere desire to expand the self-concept, and thus what is experienced is later incorporated into one's individuality and given expression through physical and mental capabilities.

Purposeful dissociation is created by design through the use of techniques such as prayer, ritual, sensory deprivation, marathon running, meditation, concentration, visualization, breathing techniques, mantra repetition, hatha yoga, and chanting. Yet not all experiences resulting from such practices can be classified as purposeful dissociation. This is an appropriate descriptor only when nurturing, peaceful, creative, and vibrant energies become increasingly apparent as awareness becomes nonlocalized. Physical boundaries seem to dissolve, the sense of time is lost, and mundane thoughts and major concerns of the day are transcended.

Even with purposeful dissociation, where the peace and bliss of the experiences can act as a magnet to awareness, the quality of intent must be deciphered to ensure a balanced life and continuation of the maturation process. It is natural to feel a sense of emptiness when the dynamic qualities that support creative expression in the world are not deliberately and regularly tapped into. This may motivate an intention to focus awareness within these lively energies via specific techniques. Individuals distinguished by creative gifts are often cognizant of the need to intentionally and responsibly integrate creative energies into their personalities and behavior.

In contrast, when a desire to escape life's challenges, to ignore one's responsibilities, or to avoid the pain of being human is the prime motivator for moving beyond the boundaries of mind-body, the result can be withdrawal from life. Meditation, chanting, and other techniques can be used in this way, as can irresponsible experimentation with psychoactive substances. Although familiarity with various constituents of consciousness may be gained, quality of life may suffer due to these constituents being compartmentalized rather than integrated.

Individuals who have embarked on the exploration of consciousness may vacillate in their intent, sometimes seeking support and sustenance for healthy participation in life and sometimes seeking escape, feeling overburdened by life's demands. The overall balance, in such cases, must be positive—that is, in the direction of life enhancement—for the evolutionary journey to proceed.

### *Directed Dissociation*

Directed dissociation is the category for dissociative phenomena that are deliberately produced, that refocus awareness, and that use the ability to navigate in, explore, or be in relationship with the constituents of consciousness. Awareness is

willfully directed so that its object can be scrutinized; the art of *presence* is skillfully practiced.

As with purposeful dissociation, meditation, relaxation, and other techniques may be employed to shift awareness, but directed dissociation is distinguished by the interactive quality of the experience. Specific information, wisdom, or guidance is actively sought and obtained.

Developing the ability to explore consciousness is analogous to developing the ability to explore the body. We are each aware, to varying degrees, of the general "flavor" of the body: the emotions that arise, the sensations within it, its sensory perceptions, and so on. But more minute details can be obtained through astute attention to what is transpiring, through biofeedback, probes, dyes, X rays, chemical analysis, observation of organs during surgery, and so forth.

Likewise, via dissociative processes we can become aware, to varying degrees, of the general "flavor" of consciousness: for example, luminous, pulsating, nurturing, peaceful, orderly. But more minute details can be obtained through directed dissociation. Those who traverse the intricacies of consciousness hold experiential knowledge of a realm that is ambiguous to most. They speak of this realm as containing creative impulses of life, healing energies for the physical world, qualities that sustain the realms of mind and body, vibrant color, archetypal powers, and hierarchies of Beings who hold great wisdom and universal love.

A wide variety of events can be classified as directed dissociation. One is shamanic journeying. Shamans voluntarily enter altered states (trance) and travel to other realms to interact with entities in order to serve their communities (Ross, 1996). The shaman is generally considered to be one of the most effective members of the tribe, "displaying superior energy, concentration, memory, knowledge, and leadership" (p. 30). Other examples may include apparent or claimed traversing of the universe beyond earth, receiving answers to ontological questions from personifications of creative and intelligent impulses (entities such as angels), conversing with the Masters on the subtle planes of existence, and remote viewing of physical plane reality (Edge, 1998). With claims of this nature, the possibility of pathology (e.g., delusional thinking) is always there and needs to be assessed and ruled out. Equally important, of course, is to recognize that these types of experiences are reported in nonpathological situations, and it is with these that we are concerned here.

Sometimes, loss of awareness of the body during directed dissociation is experienced as literally being out of the body, rather than as focusing awareness acutely beyond its limits. Richards (1991) has found that out-of-body experiences (OBEs) are common in high-functioning people and that segments of the population find their experiences to be inspirational. OBEs that are deliberately created and include navigation in and interaction with the constituents of consciousness are categorized as directed dissociation. Other OBEs may exemplify purposeful, typical, or pathological dissociation. Some, by description or definition, do not fit into the dissociative categories and might best be understood as associative phenomena because awareness of the body is not lost.

### ***Association***

Association is the category for states of being that include clear perception of the interaction between mind, body, and impulses of consciousness beyond the boundaries of mind-body. Multidimensionality is the hallmark of association: physical and nonphysical realities are simultaneously apprehended. Although the breadth of what is available for scrutiny and assimilation may be limited during an associative episode, and/or the experience may be fleeting, fully developed association is highly integrative, potentially equivalent to enlightenment or complete self-realization. When this is the case, every minute detail of one's being can be illuminated by an intentional shift in, or broadening of, awareness. Then, as consciousness is experienced as all-pervasive, the entire cosmos can be attended to at will.

For a phenomenon to be classified as associative, temporally relevant constituents from mind, body, and consciousness beyond mind-body must inform the moment. Pertinent impulses must be acknowledged so that wholeness guides action in the world. During such events perception heightens, perhaps opening "etheric" vision, subtle hearing, enhanced tactile abilities, or the ability to know the soul aspect of humanity. The experience of eternal time, where past, present, and future merge, may supplement linear time. Guidance from angelic beings, personified elements of nature, or other entities may be received while interacting in the physical world. Personal life may be viewed from the perspective of all-pervasive consciousness, creating a state where the dance of life is both performed and observed. The sense of oneness with all-that-is may arise.

At certain levels of development, depersonalization and/or derealization may be components of such exceptional human conditions. When, during such experiences, a sense of peace accompanies engagement in life, association is indeed exemplified. Sometimes, however, depersonalization and derealization give rise to anxiety and/or decreased functioning because of the significant degree of withdrawal of awareness from mind and body. This lack of integration is indicative of pathological or typical dissociation. To avoid confusion concerning the interpretation of phenomena involving states of subjective separation from mind and body or environment, precipitating factors, comfort level during the experience, and impact on functionality must all be considered.

It may be possible to transform habitual pathological or typical dissociation involving a split between a participating self and an observing self into occurrences of meaningful associative experiences through establishing a change in mindset. Castillo (1990) concludes from his review of the literature and his interviews with six practitioners of Transcendental Meditation that depersonalization is appreciated and desired by individuals who understand the observing self to be the "spiritual self," the "soul," the "Witness," or the "Higher Self" and can be experienced without any impairment in social or occupational functioning. On the other hand, individuals whose practice of relaxation techniques leads to experiences of depersonalization in the absence of a positive mindset may suffer significant anxiety.



Prudent discrimination is also necessary for the correct classification of events involving derealization. Sometimes, concrete reality seeming less concrete may indicate entrance into mystical realms where reality is reported to pulsate and shimmer with light, where "normally stable, solid, inanimate objects may be seen to "breathe," to be "unsolid, fluid, or alive" (Castillo, 1990, p. 159).

When such experiences are integrated into one's identity and one's relationship with the environment, they cannot be considered dissociative. Instead, they represent the incorporation of an aspect of our humanity that was dissociated prior to the experience; the self has expanded its capacity. But constriction can occur as well. Lack of positive intent may preclude integration, thereby producing degrees of impairment in functionality. Castillo (1990) references cases where derealization experiences induced by meditation resulted in the seeking of psychiatric treatment. Often these experiences are treated as psychopathological, leading to the introduction of pharmacotherapy (Signer, 1988). Perhaps working with mindset, intent, and the art of presence could help resolve the situation.

By permitting awareness to encompass consciousness *in* the body and consciousness expanding *beyond* the body, a more unified state is invited in which the experience of a transcendental reality is accompanied by a feeling of connectedness to it. Thus, association involving depersonalization or derealization can become a transitional phase yielding to higher levels of association—higher because the sense of separation has dissolved. As awareness expands, so does the human capacity to feel at home in, and be informed by, a multidimensional universe. Such expanded states of awareness, or experiences of association, are the ultimate goal of life-enhancing dissociative processes. In rare cases, as saints and sages have evidenced, a sublime state of enduring association can be attained that is so inclusive as to be characterized by the teaching "I am all that is."

## CONCLUSION

Humanity's impulse toward wholeness is evident in many ancient and modern transformative disciplines (Murphy, 1992). The spectrum of dissociation is a model that provides a framework for understanding the movement toward conscious wholeness and the pitfalls along the way. By spanning both sides of normal (pathological and exceptional) the spectrum invites consideration of the diversity of dissociative and associative phenomena that we as human beings actually experience. The spectrum construct also invites research on each and all of its categories, either in isolation or in interaction.

The spectrum approach to a wide variety of phenomena, both sacred and mundane, permits the merging of psychological, philosophical, and spiritual inquiries in the therapeutic setting, perhaps enhancing the power of interventions. Through classification of an experience and analysis of the quality of the intent that motivated its occurrence, therapists might facilitate the healing of pathological dissociation and unproductive typical dissociation. They might also better provide guidance to those

seeking purposeful dissociation and directed dissociation in the service of self-development. Additionally, the stabilization and continued expansion of states of association might be supported.

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