

# DISSOCIATION DURING POSITIVE SITUATIONS

Michael Pica, M.A.  
Don Beere, Ph.D.

Michael Pica, M.A., is a doctoral student in the Psy.D. program in clinical psychology at Central Michigan University, in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan. Donald B. Beere, Ph.D., is Professor and Director of Clinical Training in the Psy.D. program in clinical psychology at Central Michigan University, in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.

For reprints write Donald Beere, Ph.D., Psychology Department, Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, MI, 48859.

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## ABSTRACT

*Breaking from the traditional mode of dissociation research, this study examines the experience of dissociation during positive situations. Thirty-three of ninety (36.7%) randomly selected undergraduate students reported positive dissociative experiences. In order of ranked frequency the experiences included sports, sexual encounters, prayer, contact with nature, anticipating good news, hearing good news, acting, hobbies, musical performances, and listening to music. Interestingly, low as well as high dissociators reported these types of experiences suggesting that one need not be highly dissociative in order to dissociate during a positive situation. A qualitative analysis of descriptions of positive dissociative experiences coincides precisely with Beere's perceptual theory of dissociation: dissociation occurs when perception narrows during an intense situation of personal significance and, thus, blocks out the background.*

In contrast to traditional dissociation research, which has focused almost exclusively on dissociation during trauma, this study examines dissociation during non-traumatic, or what the authors refer to as positive situations. Experiences that come to mind include last second game victories, intense sexual encounters, and/or receiving incredibly good news. Traditionally, these experiences have been accepted, without question, as transcendent or peak-like experiences (Hood, 1973; Maslow, 1964). Consequently, they have been left unexplored within the dissociation literature. Instead, researchers have focused on the defensive function of dissociation in their attempt to understand the impact of psy-

chological trauma. Although this research has been plentiful, it accounts for only one aspect of the dissociative process and does not convey the regularity with which dissociation occurs.

Elsewhere, Beere (1995, in press) has commented on the likelihood of dissociation during non-traumatic situations. He described aspects of dissociation as follows: 1) a "subjectively intense stimulus captures experience sharply and clearly," 2) the most charged aspect of the experience is the meaning which it carries, 3) the lived-experience embodies a determining significance for the person's being-in-the-world, and 4) the smooth and integrated flow of experience is momentarily lost or dissociated. In other words, dissociation occurs when perception becomes captivated by a subjectively meaningful stimulus. As focus narrows on a particular aspect of the lived-situation, different components of the perceptual background, defined as identity, mind, body, world, and time (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), become lost. According to Beere, the loss of background is experienced as the dissociative reaction.

Although Beere (1995, in press) focused specifically on trauma-based dissociative reactions he noted that the same process could account for positive dissociative experiences. In contrast to the traumatic situation, however, a positive stimulus engages perception and shifts it away from neutral background components which are subsequently experienced as the dissociative reaction. With this in mind, the following study examined whether 1) dissociation does, in fact, occur during positive situations and 2) if so, how it is experienced. That is, is the process similar to what has been described with traumatized individuals?

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Ninety randomly selected undergraduate students, at a moderately-sized, mid-western public university in the United States, participated in this study. The subjects consisted of 36 males and 54 females. The study was approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee of the university. All subjects received extra-credit for their participation.

TABLE 1  
Example of Phenomenological Analysis: Description Number One (18-Year-Old Woman)

**Original Description Reduced to its Essential Meaning Units\***

1. It was the last chance where I had to prove myself//
2. I felt like I had so much power I could just kill the ball//
3. Before my final chance, all I could hear were hands clapping as they announced my name//
4. Everything seemed slow and unreal//
5. I could see everything, but all that was important was focused on the pitcher//

**Transformation of Description into Psychological Language with Emphasis on Dissociation**

1. S is strongly motivated to validate her being-in-the-world
2. S feels unstoppable.
3. Anticipating the moment of validation, she is only aware of certain specific perceptions.
4. Time slows and the world appears unreal.
5. Anticipating the lived-possibility of validating her being-in-the-world was all important.

\* Double slashes (//) were used to bracket each meaning unit.

**Qualitative Approach**

All subjects responded to the following questions.

Dissociation can be defined as a disturbance or alteration in the normally integrative functions of memory, identity, or consciousness. It can also be defined as an alteration in the way in which you experience yourself, your body, and the world. People might report feeling not like themselves or separated from their body, as though time had stopped or slowed, and they were separated from the world and/or seeing things as if they were in a dream. These, however, are just a few examples. Keeping this definition in mind, have you ever experienced dissociation?

Yes/No

Some theorists believe that dissociation occurs during positive situations. Have you ever dissoci-

ated during a positive situation?

Yes/No

If subjects reported a positive dissociative experience they were asked to write a description. Instructions were:

Please describe, as specifically and completely as possible, a positive dissociative experience. Please describe this experience so concretely and so comprehensively that someone else could understand it.

**Experimental Phenomenology**

Descriptions were analyzed using the methods of phenomenological research (e.g., Giorgi, 1985). In contrast to quantitative research methods, experimental phenomenology aims to understand experience from the individual's perspective. Beere (1992) commented that experimental phenomenology "attempts to educe the lived-meaning of an

experience for the experiencer as opposed to measuring objectifiable particulars whose meaning is for the experimenter" (p. 3).

Despite its non-traditional approach, experimental phenomenology is extremely rigorous, involving the psychological reduction of a given description to its essential elements and its reorganization into a general statement. Seven descriptions are needed to yield an adequate analysis. Because most readers are unfamiliar with this style of research, an example has been included. (See Table 1). By referring to the example, the reader can develop a clearer understanding of what experimental phenomenology entails and how the authors arrived at their conclusions.

The analysis begins with a thorough reading of the description. This allows the investigator to develop a basic understanding of the description in its given context. Next, the investigator breaks the description into discrete meaning units so that each statement may be reduced to its essential elements. The reduction involves two components: 1) epoche, suspending judgment and assumptions, and 2) eidetic reduction, varying each element in fantasy to establish its essential character (Beere, 1992). Although identified as two separate processes, epoche and eidetic reduction complement and interweave to distill the essential meaning of each statement (within the description).

Following the reduction, the meaning units are re-integrated into a specific psychological description. The aim of the specific description is to capture the essential quality of the original lived-experience for the specific individual. What follows is the specific description for the example.

*S experienced a positive dissociative experience in a situation in which she felt strongly motivated to validate her being-in-the-world. Anticipating the moment of validation, she was only aware of certain specific perceptions. Though she was aware of the lived world, time slowed and the world appeared unreal. Anticipating the lived-possibility of validating her being-in-the-world was all important.*

This process was used to reduce each of the seven descriptions. (See Appendix A for the seven original descriptions and their phenomenological reduction to psychological language.) After the specific descriptions are completed for each of the seven subjects, the investigator pulls out the common elements which cut across all descriptions. These common elements are organized into a general statement summarizing the essential quality of the phenomenon under study, or, in this case, dissociation during positive situations.

#### **Quantitative Approach**

In addition to the phenomenological description, each subject was administered the Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES) (Bernstein & Putnam, 1986). The DES is a 28-item self-

report measure that requires subjects to mark with a slash the percentage of time which they experience dissociative phenomena. It has excellent validity and reliability as a measure for assessing dissociativity (Bernstein & Putnam, 1986; Frischholz et al., 1990; Ross, Norton, & Anderson, 1988; Steinberg, Rounsaville, & Cicchetti, 1991). The rationale behind administering the DES was to assess whether positive dissociative experiences were reported by low as well as high dissociators.

## **RESULTS**

### *Qualitative Results*

#### *General Description of a Positive Dissociative Experience.*

A person experiences a positive dissociative experience while being aware of the personal significance of an intense lived-situation. Perception narrows to those aspects of the lived-situation which embody its meaning for the person and the person dissociates.

The qualitative analysis identified three essential elements involved in a positive dissociative experience. First and perhaps most importantly, the individual must perceive a lived situation as subjectively meaningful and experience it as intense. Second, it must be perceived so meaningfully that perception is captivated by a particular aspect of the lived-situation. This was implicitly if not explicitly evident in each of the descriptions. Finally, different components of the perceptual background become lost, resulting in the dissociative reaction. In all cases, dissociation was characterized by a slowing down and/or a speeding up of time and either a loss of mind or loss of world. All descriptions used for the analysis are included in either the text of the paper or as Appendix A.

### *Quantitative Results*

Thirty-three of the ninety subjects (36.7%) reported dissociation during positive situations. Eight of these subjects (8%) reported more than one of these experiences. If dissociation is solely a traumatically-induced experience, then no subject should have reported dissociation in positive situations. Assuming a 10-percent error in reporting (nine subjects reporting a positive dissociative experience even though none was experienced), a chi square of 71.1 was obtained ( $df = 1, p < .000$ ).

In order of ranked frequency, the experiences included sports (15%), sexual encounters (3%), prayer (3%), contact with nature (3%), anticipating good news (2%), hearing good news (2%), acting (2%) hobbies (1%), musical performances (1%), and listening to music (1%). Interestingly, subjects with low as well as high DES scores (ranging from 5.0 to 36.8,  $M = 20.7$ ,  $SD = 9.7$ ) reported dis-

sociation during positive situations. This distribution of scores was similar to that found with subjects who did not report a positive dissociative experience (2.3 to 56.6,  $M = 16.7$ ,  $SD = 12.6$ ). A  $t$ -test comparing independent group means did not find a significant difference in DES scores between the two groups ( $p = .096$ ). This finding suggests that one need not be highly dissociative, as measured by the DES, in order to dissociate during a positive situation.

## DISCUSSION

That dissociation occurs during positive situations establishes dissociation as a more widely occurring phenomenon than dissociation as an adaptive or defensive response to trauma. In other words, trauma does not appear to be necessary for dissociation. Rather, the perceived meaningfulness of the situation, whether positive or negative, captivates perception and evokes a dissociative state. This, however, does not mean that dissociation cannot be used defensively.

Consistent with other research, this study suffers from certain flaws that need to be addressed before any definite conclusions can be drawn. The first problem with this study is that one may argue that subjects were, in fact, reporting a transcendent or peak-like experience as described by Maslow (1964) and others. This type of thinking, however, reflects a narrow approach to understanding the dissociative process, one that is likely to get in the way of deepening our understanding of dissociation. In fact, one might conclude that transcendent, peak-like, and dissociative experiences can be conceptualized as the same types of experiences and that their differentiation is simply a matter of semantics.

A second potential problem with this study is that it could not be determined whether subjects reporting a positive dissociative experience were highly hypnotizable and, in fact, were reporting a hypnotic state. On the other hand, one might conclude that dissociation can look like, but not be hypnosis. Recent research, for example, demonstrates no correlation between dissociativity and hypnotizability (Council, Grant, & Mertz, 1995). A third and related problem is that the kind of dissociative experiences reported by the subjects were those described in the instructions. Understandably, subjects would have a limited knowledge of the range of dissociative experience. As a result, it is likely that the frequency of dissociative experience in positive situations is greater than that reported here.

Motivation has not been addressed by dissociation researchers. Many descriptions involved situations that were extremely motivating, such as participation in contests, concerts, and sporting events. According to Beere's theory of dissociation, motivation might mediate the narrowing of perception to what is meaningful. Likewise, motivation might be involved in intentional as opposed to spontaneous dissociation (Carlson & Putnam, 1989). Motivation, therefore, seems to be one of several components involved when peo-

ple dissociate and should be considered in future research.

Directions for future research should focus on replicating these results with various measures of dissociativity and with a measure of hypnotizability, and should also focus on further distinguishing between dissociation during positive and negative experiences. For example, do positive dissociative experiences lead to pathological dissociation or are they "normal" reactions to pleasurable experience? The construction of a positive dissociative experiences scale, measuring the frequency and intensity of such experiences, might begin to clarify such issues. In addition, future studies should examine the experience of dissociation during neutral situations. Neutral situations, by definition, should possess neither strongly positive nor negative aspects and not be particularly meaningful. Such situations should not evoke dissociation, according to Beere's (1995) theory.

These findings provide strong support for Beere's (1995, in press) perceptual theory of dissociation since they correspond precisely with what the theory proposes is the dissociative process. Beere (in press) writes, "dissociation must be meaningfully related to the person's lived-experience, being-in-the-world, at the time of [dissociation]. The figure must encompass a central aspect of the person's being-in-the world and demands full and total attention. An intense . . . stimulus tends to fix attention such that the background is temporarily lost [and the person dissociates]" (p. 21). Intensity, meaningfulness, and narrowing of perception, as hypothesized by Beere, are involved in dissociation during positive situations. Though a relatively new theory, the perceptual theory of dissociation offers some valuable insights into the nature and process of dissociation. It is the challenge of future studies to determine whether this is in fact the beginning of a comprehensive theory that the field has long awaited. ■

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## APPENDIX A

### Original Descriptions and their Phenomenological Reduction to Psychological Language

#### Original Description

1. It was the last chance where I had to prove myself. I felt like I had so much power that I could just kill the ball. Before my final chance, all I could hear were hands clapping as they called my name. Everything seemed slow and unreal. I could see everything, but all that was important was focused on the pitcher.
2. I was on homecoming court in high school right before they named the winning queen. My hands started to sweat, my stomach was turning. It was taking hours for them to call the name.
3. I was watching me and this guy laying on the beach talking and hugging. Sex was involved. It was a bright sunny day. It just made me feel so connected, but it was like I was watching myself.
4. In high school, during a football game I caught an on sides kick and ran it for ten yards. Time slowed down when the kicker's foot hit the ball and then it bounced off of a guy on the other team's foot and came straight to me. In the moments before the ball landed in my arms, time was in slow motion and I was seeing myself from the sidelines. It was very weird, but what a rush.
5. It was an important game my senior year in high school and it was the last two minutes. I was responsible for guarding the other team's number one player and top scorer. We were up two points...I just remember feeling as if I could watch myself play. I could read every move she was going to make before she did it.

#### Phenomenological Reduction

1. S experienced a positive dissociative experience in a situation in which she felt strongly motivated to validate her being-in-the-world. Anticipating the moment of validation, she was only aware of certain specific perceptions. Time slowed and the world appeared unreal. Anticipating the lived-possibility of validating her being-in-the-world was all important.
2. S experienced a positive dissociative experience in a situation in which the outcome was of deep personal significance. As she awaited knowing the outcome, she responded with intense emotion and time slowed.
3. S experienced a positive dissociative experience in a situation in which she found herself watching her intensely connected romantically and sexually intimate interaction with another.
4. S experienced a positive dissociative experience during a significant contest. As a crucial event began, S narrowly focused his perception and time slowed. As the lived-events unfolded, so as to involve S directly, time slowed and S perceived himself in action from outside his body. The experience was surreal, but physically exhilarating.
5. S experienced a positive dissociative experience during a significant contest. At the most crucial moment of the contest, the situation "called" her to exceptional performance to "win." She became totally focused on her opponent and felt as if she could observe her performance from outside her body.

6. Upon receiving a standing ovation when I gave a speech for being class President at Graduation I felt dissociated. Seeing my classmates rise to their feet overcame me and I felt as if I was on a cloud watching everything from above. It was really weird.
7. I was performing on stage and everything seemed to go in slow motion. It's like I realized I actually was on stage. All the actors' movements were slow. The laughing was slowed. The audience's laughter was slowed. Colors seemed brighter and more vivid. I suddenly was watching everyone, but was performing at the same time.
6. I experienced a positive dissociative experience when her performance is applauded as outstanding by significant others. Her awareness of the applause/acknowledgment and the intensity of her emotional reaction consumed her and "caused" her to lose a sense of herself and, then, she saw the lived-situation from outside her body. The change in her usual experience of reality felt "weird."
7. I experienced a positive dissociative experience while performing for an audience because of her awareness of the significance of the reality for her. Movements and sounds were slow. Colors were brighter and more vivid. Abruptly, she found herself aware of watching others from a distance at the same time as she was performing.