

Hypnosis and Dissociative Identity Disorder

Emma Lind

Psychology 247 A, Professor McMillan

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The intricacies of Dissociative Identity Disorder are often mysterious and fascinating. The mere idea of one person hosting completely separate personalities is difficult to fathom for most people. *Sybil*, written by Flora Rheta Schreibner, portrays the true story of a woman severely afflicted with Dissociative Identity Disorder. At the time the book was written, Sybil's case was unprecedented; she had sixteen different personalities. The treatment of Sybil's disorder lasted more than eleven years. Dr. Wilbur, Sybil's treating psychiatrist, relied heavily on hypnosis to reintegrate the multitude of personalities into one cohesive personality. Dr. Wilbur was successful in her treatment, largely due to her use of hypnosis. Hypnotism as a method for treating Dissociative Identity Disorder is useful due to the subject's high susceptibility to hypnotism and the connections found between hypnosis and dissociative states. This discovery provides further insight into the validity of reintegrating alters through means of hypnosis.

To fully appreciate the miraculous results that hypnosis can produce in DID patients, the case of Sybil Dorsett must be examined. In *Sybil*, Schreibner describes the grueling struggle of Sybil's disease. Schreibner places a heavy emphasis on Sybil's childhood, especially her experiences with her abusive mother and neglectful father. Schreibner describes how Sybil grew up constantly haunted by the horrific actions of her mother. Sybil's mother, Hattie, was mostly likely schizophrenic, emerging in and out of stages of catatonia and frenzy. Hattie performed awful experiments on Sybil, such as forcing her to drink full glasses of milk of magnesia and forcing Sybil to soil herself (Schreiber, 1973, pg. 215). She would also sexually abuse Sybil, leaving physical and emotional scars on Sybil for many years to come (Schreiber, 1973, pg. 216). Sybil's father, Willard, never intervened when he saw signs of the abuse. Sybil came to feel unworthy and unloved because of the neglect from her father when she reached out for help.

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Sybil's parents also implicitly sexualized their relationship with their daughter by exposing her to the "primal scene"; Sybil witnessed her parents having sex many times a week until she was nine years old because she was forced to sleep in the same room (Schreiber, 1973, pg. 186).

Willard and Hattie did not stop this pattern, despite Sybil's objections. The constant neglect and violations of Sybil's wellbeing caused deeply repressed emotions, which Dr. Wilbur recovered through the use of hypnosis and psychotherapy.

To deal with the emotional trauma of the abuse, Sybil created different personalities, or alters, to cope with the pain. As Dr. Wilbur met with Sybil for therapy, the various personalities emerged. Each personality knew about Sybil, but Sybil was unaware that other personalities inhabited her body. Every single personality had their own age, perceived appearance, talents, and interests. A few personalities in particular dominated the conversations with Dr. Wilbur throughout the therapy sessions. Peggy Lou Baldwin and Peggy Ann Baldwin emerged as Sybil's defenses against anger and fear. The two Peggy personalities were young in age, and often acted out in defiance. For example, Sybil would wake up from one of her fugues to discover that she had a bill for a broken car window that Peggy Lou had shattered in anger (Schreiber, 1973, pg. 69). Peggy Lou and Peggy Ann were able to deal with Hattie's violence; they possessed the ability to react with anger, whereas Sybil did not.

Another prominent alter was Victoria, or Vicky. Vicky represented the ideal Sybil who was confident, assertive, and competent. Vicky claimed to have knowledge of each personality, and was the omniscient alter. The all-knowing personality is often found in patients with DID. In Douglass and Watkins' study, *The Relation of Spontaneous Amnesia, Ego States, and Hidden Observers to Post-Hypnotically Dissociated Task Interference*, the role of the "hidden observer" is described. Douglass and Watkins describe the phenomenon of hidden observers emerging

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during hypnosis, and the possible consequences of such personalities. The study concluded that the hypnotisability of a subject determined how well the other personalities were able to work with the main personality. Douglass and Watkins also contended that if the main personality had an impermeable wall against the additional personalities, then they were able to complete tasks to a higher degree of success. However, many times throughout the book, Vicky expressed the value of reintegration as imperative for Sybil's success in daily tasks. The multitude of unknown personalities hindered Sybil's ability to function. Vicky often emerged when Sybil needed to complete complex tasks, often pertaining to social relationships. Vicky was eager to help Dr. Wilbur with the integration process. Dr. Wilbur often consulted Vicky to gauge the effectiveness of the treatment, or to inquire about the status of the other personalities.

While most of Sybil's alters were female, there were two male alters. These personalities, named Mike and Sid respectively, served as reflections of the male relationships in Sybil's life. Mike represented Sybil's Willard's father, while Sid represented Willard himself (Schreiber, 1973, pg. 283). Mike and Sid were able carpenters and handymen, and genuinely thought they were male. Mike and Sid presented the most objections to Dr. Wilbur's reintegration efforts, as they were extremely opposed to becoming female.

As the different alters emerged, Dr. Wilbur decided to use hypnosis to facilitate the reintegration method. This process correlates strongly with Richard Kluft's techniques he found effective in his study, *Hypnosis in the Treatment of Dissociative Identity Disorder and Allied States: An Overview and Case Study*. Kluft describes various methods of hypnosis, many of which mirror Dr. Wilbur's practices. Using the case study of a woman named Gwen, Kluft describes the effective means of hypnosis. A main tenet of hypnosis for reintegration and treatment of trauma is the use of curtailing abreactions. This method is completed by suggesting

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“that whatever needs to come through for the patient to end the session in a stabilized state, will come through at a rate suggested by the therapist over a period of time specified and counted down by the therapist” (Kluft, 2012). This technique was especially useful when Dr. Wilbur integrated the ages of each alter. She was able to use this age progression to unite the alters. For example, when Ruthie, a two year old alter, was addressed, Dr. Wilbur instructed, ““In ten minutes, you will be six”” (Schreiber, 1973, pg. 403). Both Dr. Wilbur and Kluft’s findings validated the importance of curtailed abreactions in hypnosis.

At the end of the book, Dr. Wilbur’s efforts with hypnosis were successful and Sybil achieved full reintegration. Though Dr. Wilbur also utilized psychotherapy and other means of therapy to treat Sybil, the use of hypnosis proved to be crucial in achieving reintegration. Because Sybil’s dissociative level was high, the hypnosis was able to permeate her unconscious state and provide insight into the other alter. Schreiber’s account of Sybil’s success, combined with Kluft, Douglass, and Watkins’ findings, reveal that hypnosis is an effective means of treating patients with DID.

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