

Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Dissociation and Mental Health

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A Review of *THE DISSOCIATIVE MIND*. Elizabeth F. Howell.
Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 2005.

In pursuit of the impressive goal to “reformulate our psychological theory” to account for dissociative processes in mental health, Elizabeth F. Howell embarks on a comprehensive review of historical and contemporary theories of dissociation. Structurally, the first third of *The Dissociative Mind* lays out four traditions or approaches to dissociation: Janetian, attachment/relational, Sternian, and Freudian. The middle third of the text emphasizes attachment and dissociation. The book closes with chapters that broadly consider personality-related issues in the context of dissociation, including topics such as narcissism, gender, and psychopathy. Stylistically, Howell offers the reader detailed summaries of dissociation theories developed by those whose work has informed modern conceptualizations of dissociation. The richness of her summaries is augmented by case examples from Howell’s own practice, as well as excerpts from the writings of those theorists on whose shoulders the field stands.

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Howell opens the book with an overview of how dissociation relates to trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, laying the groundwork for later descriptions of dissociation in the broader human context. Covering a breadth of topics, the opening chapter can appear cursory and fragmented at times. We suspect that this appearance has much to do with the need to introduce so many complex concepts that will then thread through the remaining chapters. However, newcomers to the dissociation literature may have difficulty orienting themselves to new concepts and key issues in this first chapter. Chapter 2 offers the reader additional orientation to the topic through discussions of the historical foundations of dissociation theories. Howell traces the history of intellectual thinking about multiplicity, citing sources ranging from psychoanalysis to neuroscience.

No review of dissociation theories would be complete without adequate consideration of the socio-political contexts in which theorists have observed and written about dissociative phenomena. Howell emphasizes these considerations in Chapters 3-5 where she describes psychodynamic, interpersonal and relational, and hybrid approaches to dissociation. Chapter 3, which focuses on psychodynamic approaches, provides an especially nice example of Howell's consideration of the socio-political forces at play when Janet, Freud, Ferenczi, and Fairbairn developed and defended (or modified, as the case may be) their views.

Writing on interpersonal violence and posttraumatic responses often focuses on the individual victim, all too easily losing sight of the relational context in which violence was perpetrated by another human being. In contrast, Howell never strays far from her refreshing and important emphasis on the self in relation to others. Though themes about the self in relation to others are infused throughout the text, she highlights interpersonal approaches in Chapter 4 by paying homage to Sullivan, who developed the first relational theory of anxiety, trauma, and dissociation, as well as introduced the concept of "selective inattention." She also describes contributions by Bromberg, Davies and Fawley-O'Dea, and Stern.

Howell's skill at describing and contrasting a range of theories without passing judgment as to which is superior sets an important tone for her review of several hybrid, contemporary theories of dissociation in Chapter 4. In the context of discussing hybrid models (including Ryle's model of multiple self states, van der Hart and colleagues' structural theory, and Hilgard's neodissociation theory), Howell highlights phenomena that have been missing from or underrepresented in dissociation theory, such as somatoform dissociation. She echoes important

points that have been made in the field about the dangers of attempting to build a theory of dissociation while missing central aspects of the construct, in this case manifestations of dissociation in the physical body. While Howell does provide some explicit analysis on the interrelationships between the hybrid theories, she always leaves much room for the reader to draw conclusions about the commonalities/divergences across approaches.

In the latter two-thirds of the book, Howell begins the interesting process of integrating the theoretical foundations described above into considerations of both attachment and personality. Chapters 6-7 address the relationship between attachment and dissociation, first describing attachment theory and then providing a detailed analysis of how the theory relates to dissociative processes. Building on the concepts introduced in the first third of the book, she makes a strong case that dissociation can result from disrupted attachment, using case examples to effectively illustrate her descriptions.

Howell next discusses dissociation in the context of other relevant literatures. Chapters 8-10 provide a useful reconnection to psychodynamic theory, explaining how dissociation fits in with thinking about processes such as projective identification and defenses. In these later chapters, Howell really begins to make the case for how dissociative processes can help us understand mental health more generally. For example, she argues in Chapter 10 that traumatic dissociation inevitably results in narcissism. She contends that traumatic dissociation leads to the need for one self-state to develop a self-care system in order to survive; this omnipotent self-sufficiency results in pathological narcissism.

In Chapter 11, Howell explores the connection between traumatic dissociation and gender, arguing that many aspects of gender roles are partially trauma-determined (thus explaining why these roles are so difficult to change). To this end, Howell provides background in terms of both relevant prevalence statistics and feminist theory. She describes the “posttraumatic gendering of girls and boys,” including a typology of each, and makes a strong, organized case for her theory connecting trauma and gender literatures. She relies effectively on empirical data as well as theory, making this chapter one of the most well-constructed and engaging in the book.

The text culminates in a chapter examining the relationship between dissociation and psychopathy. By contrasting dissociation in the context of psychopathy with dissociation in other groups, Howell highlights some of the motivations for and effects of dissociation. For

example, she argues that psychopathic dissociation, unlike other types of dissociation, is not used for positive purposes. Howell also makes a connection to attachment as she brings these latter chapters back to themes raised earlier in the text.

The *Dissociative Mind* provides an excellent summary of the history of dissociation theories. In covering a great deal of important ground, the text occasionally strays from the goal of developing a reformulated theory aimed at integrating dissociation and psychological disorders. The strength of this book is as an integration of many exciting dialogues emerging in the literature. Howell adds some of the best of what a productive dialogue should be: openness to diverse approaches, awareness of socio-political context in which this work happens, and a curiosity for how dissociative processes inform a variety of mental health issues. We anticipate and hope that further development and expansion of Howell's approach, will be aided by inclusion of relevant research data. Though certainly the theories on which Howell bases her arguments have been founded on clinical and research observation, we guess that the incorporation of additional empirical data will aid in the process of developing, evaluating, and advancing these ideas.

In sum, *The Dissociative Mind* provides a thorough context for evaluating current dissociation theories. The case descriptions that Howell uses to bring the complex and competing theories to life through are true gems. Her book will be of particular interest and benefit to those interested in obtaining an overview of the history of dissociation theory, as well as a description of how dissociation relates to current psychodynamic constructs. As dialogue in the field focuses on the development of integrative models, we anticipate that this book will provide a valued voice that models drawing on the best the field has to offer to advance dissociation theories.

REFERENCE

Howell, E.F. (2005). *The Dissociative Mind*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.