



Procedural memory in dissociative identity disorder: When can inter-identity amnesia be truly established?☆

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Abstract

In a serial reaction time task, procedural memory was examined in Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). Thirty-one DID patients were tested for inter-identity transfer of procedural learning and their memory performance was compared with 25 normal controls and 25 controls instructed to simulate DID. Results of patients seemed to indicate a pattern of inter-identity amnesia. Simulators, however, were able to mimic a pattern of inter-identity amnesia, rendering the results of patients impossible to interpret as either a pattern of amnesia or a pattern of simulation. It is argued that studies not including DID-simulators or simulation-free memory tasks, should not be taken as evidence for (or against) amnesia in DID.

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1. Introduction

Overactive, underactive, obsessive, or avoidant utilizations of memory characterize numerous psychopathologies (Spiegel, Frischholz, & Spira, 1988). A disorder in which a functional failure of memory is considered to be a core phenomenon is Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), previously referred to as Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD). In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed. (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), DID is characterized by the presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states, who recurrently take control of the person's behavior and who each have their own relatively enduring pattern of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the environment and self. DID patients very frequently report episodes of inter-identity amnesia, in which an identity claims amnesia for events experienced by other identities (Boon & Draijer, 1993; Coons, Bowman, & Milstein, 1988; Putnam, Guroff, Silberman, Barban, & Post, 1986; Ross et al., 1990; for a review see Gleaves, May, & Cardeña, 2001). However, this does not mean that patients report a dense amnesia between all identities. Different degrees of amnesia may exist between various identities and reported amnesia may either be mutually or one-way, that is, identity A reports awareness of the experiences of identity B, while B reports no knowledge of the experiences of identity A (Ellenberger, 1970; Janet, 1907; Peters, Uytterlinde, Consemulder, & Van der Hart, 1998).

Whereas most clinical DID experts agree that DID is accompanied by a disturbance in episodic memory, they seem to disagree as to whether identities share implicit memory, such as priming and procedural memory (cf. Merckelbach, Devilly, & Rassin, 2001), that is, the expression of information without conscious recollection (Schacter, 1987). Putnam (1997), for example, stated that “fluctuations in the level of basic skills, in habits, and in recall of knowledge are classic forms of memory dysfunction in dissociative patients” (p. 82) and “paradoxically, it seems as if overlearned information and skills are especially susceptible to intermittent failures of memory retrieval” (p. 83). On the other hand, Cardeña (2000) stated “in dissociative amnesia, the individual loses explicit memory for personal experience, while implicit memory for general knowledge, skills, habits, and conditioned responses is unimpaired” (p. 57).

Six experimental studies have examined implicit memory transfer between identities, most of them focusing on inter-identity priming (Dick-Barnes, Nelson, & Aine, 1987; Eich, Macaulay, Loewenstein, & Dihle, 1997a, Eich, Macaulay, Loewenstein, & Dihle, 1997b; Huntjens et al., 2002; Nissen, Ross, Willingham, Mackenzie, & Schacter, 1988; Peters et al., 1998; for a review see Dorahy, 2001). Priming studies have yielded mixed results, which Eich et al. (1997a) and Nissen et al. (1988) ascribed to the influence of what they called identity-specific factors at the time of encoding and retrieval. In terms of encoding, evidence of amnesia in DID was obtained on conceptually driven tasks that make use of semantically rich materials that they argued was interpreted in different ways by different identities. In contrast, evidence of transfer between identities was obtained on data-driven tasks, in which, according to their reasoning, encoding leaves little room for identity-specific interpretation. In terms of retrieval, transfer of information was obtained on tasks allowing for only a single response on each trial and evidence of amnesia was obtained on tasks allowing a wide range of responses. However, in the most recent study on inter-identity priming in DID, which was performed by our group, we found no objective evidence for inter-identity amnesia on a variety of priming tasks including both conceptually driven and perceptually driven tasks, and both tasks with single and multiple responses (Huntjens et al., 2002).

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