A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF DISSOCIATIONAL STATES

I. Research Plan

A. Introduction and Specific Aims

1. Introduction:

Dissociation represents a widely distributed human phenomenon manifested
to a greater or lesser extent by individuals and varying in incidence from
society to society. In Western societies, dissociational states are usually
discussed in psychopathological and clinical contexts; in many other societies,
such states are both institutionalized, and culturally rewarded. Although
these states have been studied in a number of non-Western societies, no
attempt has been made to analyze the range of findings in ways permitting
the construction of a theory with transcultural implications.

2. Current status of research in this area:

Within the last ten years we have witnessed a considerable interest among
psychiatrists, psychologists and other behavioral scientists in the effects of
drugs on behavior, therapeutic uses of hypnosis, "brainwashing," and a number
of related phenomena. Anthropological studies are of considerable relevance in
this context. However, such studies are not currently readily available, nor
are they systematized in ways permitting direct use by other behavioral scien-
tists. Consequently, such studies as those by Gill and Brenman, Fisher,
Wallace, Sargent and others, while demonstrating an interest in, and a need
for, anthropological data, also demonstrate the lack of readily available
material.

There is much debate in the literature of anthropology and psychiatry
concerning the supposed pathology or non-pathology of dissociational states
among various peoples, quite aside from their own cultural evaluation of them.
The proposed study should provide some basis for such judgments as well as for
evaluating certain related issues raised by Arieti and Meth, when they state:

It must also be kept in mind that hallucinations and delusions, which we consider almost pathognomonic of psychoses, are normal and frequent occurrences in many exotic people during their trance states. Hallucinations in these states, however, have a different character and significance from those occurring in psychosis. They are generally benign and not persecutory in content, last only as long as the trance does and are more often visual not auditory.

Yet these same authors also assert that shamans are often mentally ill, since:

they are more apt to achieve the dissociative states of trance and possession which are required in the ceremonies of many primitive people.

Arieti and Meth combine a discussion of hallucinations with one on trance and spirit possession. Wallace has lucidly analyzed the terminological confusion involved here. We submit furthermore, that the issues raised by Arienti and Meth are not as definitely settled as these authors appear to suggest, and that a thorough analysis of the large corpus of available data is required before they may be decided upon.

3. Rationale of the proposed study:

In view of Wallace's work on hallucination, we wish to limit our study explicity to dissociational states which are institutionalized and which are interpreted as spirit possession by the people in question. The distinction between hallucinations and dissociational states is methodologically an important one. In hallucination the subject maintains an identity separate from the content of his hallucination, whereas in dissociational states beings of various types are impersonated and the subjects' own identity may be in obe-yance for a greater or lesser peiod of time. Self-perception and body image are likely to be affected by this process; the socio-cultural correlates of such states may be hypothesized to be different from those of hallucination.
Also, there is a considerable difference implied in the fact that hallucination is largely a private experience, whereas impersonations are often dramatically public. It is therefore anticipated on the basis of some preliminary work, that data on such states are more adequate. Also, additional sources are available, as in films and photographs.

4. Aims:

The aim of the proposed study is the mapping, on a world-wide basis, of institutional types of dissociational states interpreted in native terminologies as due to possession by spirits. In order to proceed to such a mapping, it is necessary to develop a typology of these states, using biological, situational and cultural parameters. The development of this typology, and of the categories for its development, is the first objective of the proposed study.

B. Methods of Procedure

The project plan involves the development of a scheme for analyzing institutionalized states along various parameters, as a preliminary to mapping such states on a world-wide basis.

Biological Parameters:

While it is neither desirable nor possible to make a rigid distinction between biological, on the one hand, and socio-cultural dimensions on the other, operationally it may be desirable to recognize that certain behaviors associated with dissociation have a strong biological component, and indeed alteration of motor behavior and other physiologic functions is virtually pathognomonic of the state. Consequently, the following biological dimensions of altered reality orientation seem worthy of exploration:

1. Mode of Induction:

Even in societies in which dissociational behavior is not regarded as
pathological, and such behavior is explained as spirit possession, it would seem probable that such behavior is not regarded as normal, i.e., it represents a departure from customary behavior. This cultural definition of behavior as abnormal (whether in the direction of increased or decreased capabilities) may account for the wide variety of techniques and paraphernalia, such as rhythmic sounds, hyperventilation, drugs, etc. used in trance induction. Methods of inducing trance should be investigated on several levels:

a. First, the pharmacological properties of the various materials used, should, if possible, be identified, in order to determine whether or not significant alteration of physiological function has been attained prior to or during trance induction.

b. Many modes of trance induction, e.g., drumming, manipulation of body parts, fixation of the eyes, etc., seem to have primarily a psychological effect, and these show a striking similarity to methods used to induce hypnosis in Western subjects.

There is a need to separate these two types of trance induction and, at the same time, recognize the interplay of biological and psychological factors.

2. A second problem is that of who becomes "possessed" and the frequency of dissociational behavior. It seems unlikely that trance, regardless of the desirability of the state, can be achieved with equal ease by everyone. According to Gill and Brenman, only 20% of Americans make "good" hypnotic subjects, while among the Pukapukans only old men who have the appropriate dream experience are considered capable of achieving dissociation in connection with religious ceremonies. It seems probable that the most important variables here are socio-cultural rather than constitutional; however, in attempting to typologize dissociational states the latter possibility should not be dismissed out.
of hand. Consequently, it will be necessary to classify institutionalized
dissociational states by frequency according to sex, age, and if possible,
other physical factors: body type, racial type in multiracial societies,
etc., in order to determine the bio-cultural components.

3. Thirdly, there is the problem of physiological changes during
induction of trance, as well as alterations in motor and other behavior under
trance. In the nature of the case, physiological changes will have to be
studied primarily from subjective reports of feelings. Similarities in the
terms used to describe symptoms of trance induction in widely scattered and
culturally distinct areas are impressive.

Examples may be cited:

When I went in trance, I did not remember anything, and everything
looked yellow to me...When I go in trance, I am soaked into from
beneath by the burning; then my legs shiver. After that, it rises
and rises. In a moment, all at once, my head is heavy. I remem-
ber again, and forget again, alternately. (Jane Belo: Trance in
Bali, page 39)

Some informants say that before darkness engulfs their brains, they
feel pins and needles in their legs or a strange heaviness which
puts their feet to the earth. Some compare the first inrush of the
spirit to a blow on the nape of the neck. Then all sense of time
vanishes. (Alfred Métraux: Voodoo in Haiti, page 123)

It is tempting to speculate that despite cultural differences in content and in
theories of possession, there are certain biological communalities involved.
These, at least, should be investigated, as well as the manifest differences
in dissociational behavior. These differences may be highly correlated with a
number of culturally determined features, e.g., body image, ethnopsychology,
self perception, etc., while the similarities may relate to far reaching racial
or even species characteristics.

The above suggestions are highly speculative and are based on a limited
number of descriptions of trance in some thirty non-Western societies. It
should be emphasized that only a thorough combing of the ethnographic literature, and a classification of the data which it contains, will permit the actual formulation of crucial hypotheses.

Psychological and Socio-cultural Parameters:

Although numerous theories have been offered concerning dissociational states in various societies, they have usually been couched in terms of individual psychology: as due to individual psychopathology, as learned behavior expressing repressed emotions, as normal, as culturally learned and culturally rewarded behavior, as cultural prophylaxis, etc. Without disputing at least some of these suggestions, we wish to ask what variables are associated with the institutionalization of dissociational states in some societies and not in others, and the particular form these institutionalizations take. It is assumed that within the frame work of such institutionalization, learning will take place and psychologically and sociologically strategically located individuals will manifest appropriate behavior. Institutionalized dissociational states may be divided into those socially approved and encouraged and those which are disapproved, and for which exorcism or other methods of discouragement are used. Connected with such evaluations are various theories of explanation for the phenomena observed. Other associated elements may be found in the following: mythological themes, associated ritual, role playing and impersonation, masks, clothing, music, and dance. Food, drink, sacrifice, and the use of various paraphernalia also belong here.

Behavior may be stereotyped or individualized and the latitude in this area will be related to cultural theory. Specific cultural uses of dissociational states must be examined: for curers or cures, as mediums or oracles, as signs of supernatural grace and conversion, etc. These uses may also be met by dreams
and there may exist patterns of dream interpretation. Such theories concerning dissociational states as well as dreams are of primary importance in that they present clues to the cognitive aspects of dissociation as held by the participants. While dissociation may be variously valued positively and negatively, both types are often associated with theories of possession by spirits, i.e., both types take into account in their conceptualization the subjective experience of ego alien elements.

In some societies, there may exist both positively valued and negatively valued dissociational states. Dissociation may appear as an "illness" which represents a necessary preliminary to acquiring professional status as a shaman or curer. Or, as in the zar cult of Ethiopia, dissociational states may be induced as part of a cure for various ailments. The personnel and the circumstances involved in dissociation are thus of primary importance.

Historical Parameters:

The world-wide distribution of dissociational states is not known at present. It is evident that we shall be able to discern various types of spatial patterns; there exists a relationship between such distributions at present and diffusion and migrations at earlier times. Therefore, the proposed mapping of the distribution of different institutionalized patterns of dissociational states, together with a mapping of various cultural theories to account for them, may give clues to their paths of diffusion in the past.

Thus, Simpson and Hammond, for example, using various specific criteria, have shown that trance states in the Afro-American religions of the Caribbean region have their origins in West Africa, rather than in the Protestant Revival. On the other hand, it is likely that in terms of social function, these states and the cultural patterns into which they fit are more closely related to the
Protestant Revival and to the Pentecostal sects in the U.S. than to their own African antecedents.

C. Significance of the Research

The justifications of the proposed study are both methodological and substantive:

1. It will provide an analysis and evaluation of the existing ethnographic literature in this area, both as available in the Human Relations Area Files and elsewhere.

2. It will make these findings readily available.

3. It will develop a set of categories for the study of dissociational phenomena.

4. Consequently, it will develop a basis for problem oriented field work in this area.

5. Last but not least, it will provide research training for graduate students in anthropological methods and techniques.

It is evident that cross-cultural research on dissociational states has broad ramifications not only for anthropology but also for neighboring disciplines. In spite of these ramifications, and repeated references to such states in the literature of psychiatry, psychology and physiology, as well as of anthropology and history, no attempt has yet been made at a general synthesis of the data on these diverse and widely distributed phenomena. It should be stressed that while many societies institutionalize such states, the precise distribution of such institutionalizations and of their various forms is not known.

When institutionalized, such states are frequently incorporated into ritual activities and are given a major place in a society's world view and in its
rituals. It should be noted that not only among non-Western groups, but also among some sub-groups in the U. S. today (e.g., Pentecostalists, Snake handlers, spiritualists) that such states continue to be seen in supernatural terms. Yet the major trend of the Western rationalist tradition has been not to provide institutionalized channels for man's dissociational capacity. In this tradition, dissociational states seem to be uniformly assigned to the realm of the pathological. Yet it is clear that even in Western society the content of dissociational behavior whether in hysteria, schizophrenia or hypnosis—is to a large extent culturally patterned.

While the world-wide task of collecting ethnographic data is by no means completed, and in the nature of the case, can perhaps never be completed, an urgent need exists for systematic classification of the vast body of data already collected. Furthermore, these data need to be presented in more standardized form to make them readily usable in the development of cross-cultural theories. Indeed, a main contribution of Anthropology to other disciplines has been its wealth of information concerning non-Western cultures which permits a wider testing of theories based on observation in Western cultures. Making such materials available, as Murdock has observed, is one of the major problems in current cross-cultural research:

When masses of ethnographic literature must be ransacked for specific items of information, the problem of locating the sources themselves is complicated by locating the information desired in the sources after they have been assembled. Indexes and tables of contents are frequently of little use. Often the entire literature must be combed almost page by page to make certain that important bits of data have not been overlooked—an immensely time-consuming task. An unfortunate consequence of this necessity is that hundreds of anthropologists have laboriously combed the same standard ethnographies for different items of information, but that the careful notes they have accumulated are rarely of use to anyone else. Another is that dozens of government agencies, at excessive cost, have excerpted masses of information about foreign countries on subjects of immediate
pertinence but are no better off than when they started when it becomes imperative to know in a hurry some vital facts of previously unanticipated significance.

It would seem that the responsibility of codifying and systematizing the ethnographic literature is primarily that of the anthropologist. In the area of dissociational states, the codification presented by the Human Relations Area Files is only of limited use at present.

D. Facilities Available:

Murdock has prepared a list of 560 societies, representative of fifty major culture areas of the world. He has coded a number of variables for these societies, primarily in the area of kinship and subsistence activities. Data of some substance exist for these societies, although it is anticipated that these data are uneven for the categories under discussion here. Literature on these societies will be surveyed, as well as such additional literature as will come to light in this investigation. In short, an attempt will be made to map all available data and to prepare an extensive bibliography of sources. This task will be greatly facilitated by the Human Relations Area Files, a microcard edition of which is available at the Ohio State University Library. Extensive holdings in ethnography are available also, in various languages both in the form of volumes and series as well as in the periodical literature. For some societies, biographical and psychological data related to dissociational states are available in the Microcard Collection of Primary Records in Culture and Personality, edited by Bert Kaplan.

Another source of information is to be found in photographs and films. Beginnings of such a collection are available. It is suggested that the present project include the development of archives of visual documents concerning dissociational states. Such visual documents constitute crucial research materials
at present widely scattered among institutions and individual field workers. Analyses of motor behavior and related phenomena are virtually impossible without such documents, since verbal descriptions are frequently unreliable. Photographs and drawings encountered in reading the materials will be reproduced on slides, and these together with materials to be purchased, will lead to the development of archives of visual documents. Such reproductions can be made in cooperation with the Department of Photography at this University.

Source material will be excerpted by means of reproduction by xerography. Such a machine and related facilities are available through the cooperation of the University Library. While all details of transcription and other technical aspects of the procedures cannot be formulated at present, it seems likely that coding on punch cards would be less suitable for these materials than some other forms of recording. However, if during the course of the research it seems feasible to employ mechanical means of data storage and retrieval, such equipment is available in the Department's Statistical Laboratory.

II. Supporting Data

A. Previous Work:

The proposed study is a direct outgrowth of previous work by the principal investigator, particularly pre-doctoral field work conducted in Haiti during 1947-48. A number of unpublished and published writings have resulted from this work over the years; (See bibliography below). Dissociational states are highly institutionalized in Haiti in the context of the vodu cult. The field work was oriented toward problems in culture and personality and resulted in the collection of Rorschach protocols, life history materials, children's drawings as well as in observational materials and recorded interviews. The analysis of these materials as well as a study of the literature on related
societies made it clear that there has been considerable controversy on the significance and interpretation of these states. It has become clear that, following Robert Lowie's dictum, we do not understand ethnographic materials until we understand their distributions.

These interests have been further stimulated by the reading of current literature in the culture and personality field, in part in connection with the teaching of a course in this area over the past thirteen years, as well as the teaching of courses on comparative religion and African ethnography. A former graduate student, Frances Mischel conducted field work in a local Negro Pentecostal Church which resulted in an M.A. thesis, and later did pre-doctoral field work in Trinidad. During both of these studies the principal investigator acted as a member of the student's advisory committee.

During the summer of 1962 several months have been devoted by the principal investigators to a graduate seminar in which problems in the cross-cultural study of dissociational states were investigated. Materials on some seventy societies were read by the seminar members in taking the initial steps toward an analytic outline for collecting and codifying data relating to dissociational states. Preliminary orientation toward this task was given the students in the form of films, and still photographs illustrating behavior during trance in Western and non-Western cultures, as well as through the presentation of published and unpublished illustrative case materials. The seminar resulted in a considerable clarification of concepts, in the study of locally available sources; in a clarification of the problems involved in training graduate students, in the collection of some preliminary data on these seventy societies and in the development of significant questions to be included in an analytic outline.
B. Personal Publications:

Published and unpublished writings of the principal investigator related to the present project:


11. b1956, Rorschachs of Seventy-five Haitian Children, aged 7-15, and Forty-Two Haitian Adults. Ibid.


In Press:

55 articles on Primitive religion, including:

Voodoo, Shango, Spirit Possession, Exorcism, Demonology, etc.
Grolier's Encyclopedia

Voodoo, American Oxford Encyclopedia

Voodoo, Encyclopedia Americana

Forthcoming:

"Prolegomena to a Study of Trance and Spirit Possession," MS.

C. Pertinent Literature References:

Literature referred to in the discussion of the Research Plan


