

Structural Dissociation Model

A survival strategy.

Faced with abuse and neglect, children need to find some way of surviving psychologically. Abused children make use of the brain's capacity to split into parts. There may be a 'good child' who gets on with normal life as best he or she can, and who 'disowns' the 'bad child', to whom the abuse and neglect happened, as 'not me'.

The Structural Dissociation model of personality posits splitting as a survival orientated adaptive response to the demands of a traumatic environment. Moreover it proposes that this response is based on the left brain/right brain split that supports 'disowning' of the 'not me' or trauma related parts, and also supports the ability to function without awareness of being traumatised.

Splitting also supports the development of parts driven by animal defensives that are crucial to survival. The trauma related parts, activated by normal life stimuli, and driven by implicit trauma responses may experience threats and automatically engage in defensive behaviours such as fight, flight, freeze, submit, and cry for help.

Survival, but at a cost!

While this is a valuable survival strategy, it also comes at a cost. To keep the rejected part 'out of the way' long after the traumatic events have occurred, individuals must rely on dissociation, denial and/or self-hatred for enforcing the disconnection. In the end, they have survived trauma by disowning their most vulnerable and wounded parts of themselves.

Although the term 'parts of the personality' is a controversial concept in the mental health world, we will continue to use it in the videos you will see. There are three reasons for doing so: first, use of the term does suggest there is a *whole* person with whom we are working as therapists. Second, the term is in common usage – who has not said something like, "Part of me wants an ice cream and part of me says 'no not today'". So, it's easily understood by clients at least in Western culture. Third, there is evidence that the brain develops neural networks that consist of neural pathways that consistently fire together, and that these neural systems can encode complex systems of traits or systems that represent aspects of our personalities or ways of doing being. In other words, a 'part' may be represented by one of these networks as a physical system reality in the brain of an adult.

Such neural systems can be complex with a subjective sense of identity or can be a much simpler collection of traits associated with different roles played by the individual. This is consistent with what most of us working with parts will have experienced. Some parts have a definite sense of identity and are quite elaborate in their ability to communicate, while others are much less so.

Outline of the structural dissociation model.

This model hypothesises that there are three types of structures that develop as a result of trauma:

1. *Primary Structural Dissociation* is the simplest division of the personality. There are just two parts. First, there is an 'Apparently Normal Part' (ANP) that carries out the action systems crucial to 'getting on with life'. The other part is called the 'Emotional Part' (EP), which holds the feelings and memories of the trauma and the mammalian defensive reactions related to it, including fight, flight, and freeze or tonic immobility.

This division seems to evolve most often in consequence of a single traumatising event, although it can also be observed in childhood abuse survivors in the form of the 'inner child' phenomenon. Primary structural dissociation is characteristic of simple trauma-related disorders, such as simple forms of PTSD, and some 'conversion disorders (a mental condition in which a person has blindness, paralysis, or other nervous system (neurologic) symptoms that cannot be explained by medical evaluation).

In this form of dissociation the ANP is the major 'shareholder' of the personality and maintains executive control most of the time carrying out adult action systems crucial to survival and such as exploration, attachment, caretaking and sexuality. The EP is most of the time not in control, but can take full executive control during a flashback in which orientation to the present is lost, and the person is in a full reliving of prior trauma. An EP is a psychological structure that is a separate, dissociated biopsychosocial subsystem with reactivated traumatic memories that may involve feelings, various sensory perceptions or strongly held beliefs. In cases of PTSD, EP's are thought to be more rudimentary than in cases of Secondary and Tertiary dissociation

2. *Secondary Structural Dissociation* is more complex and develops when traumatization is prolonged and repeated. The range of complexity can be very significant. The simplest form consists of two EPs and one ANP that involves the majority of the functioning of the personality. Other traumatised individuals become much more divided, with several to many EPs. These EPs may be present in various forms and may have quite varied degrees of separateness, autonomy, and elaborated characteristics such as name, age and gender.
3. *Tertiary Structural Dissociation* involves not only more than one EP, but also more than one ANP part. The model proposes that this form of dissociation is characteristic of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). In such cases the action systems crucial to 'getting on with life' such as exploration, attachment, caretaking and sexuality, which are found in a single a ANP in primary and secondary structural dissociation, are now divided among two or more ANP's. And as in some cases of secondary structural dissociation, some EP's may be more complex and autonomous, appear in daily life, and take over full Executive control other than simply defence.

(1) van der Hart, O., Nijenhuis, E. R. S., & Steele, K. (2006). *The haunted self: Structural dissociation and the treatment of chronic traumatization*. New York: Norton:

This summary by emdr Gateway 2018