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**Personality Correlates of Dissociation: Benign
Characteristics or Predilections to Mental
Illness?**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine dissociative experiences and general mental health in a non-clinical population and to determine how the associated personality characteristics of fantasy proneness and absent-mindedness impacted on this relationship. A self-report questionnaire consisting of the Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES), the Creative Experiences Questionnaire (CEQ), the Cognitive Failures Questionnaire (CFQ), and the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) was administered to a sample of 96 volunteer university students, most of who were enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses. Positive and significant correlations were found between all four of the variables of interest; the most robust relationships being between dissociative experiences and fantasy proneness on the one hand, and dissociative experiences and absent-mindedness on the other hand. With the exception of absent-mindedness, with Asians scoring lower than both NZ European and Maori, there were no significant differences between ethnic groups, or between men and women, on any of the other variables. Consistent with previous research, age was found to be inversely related to both dissociative experiences and absent-mindedness. A hierarchical regression analysis revealed that dissociative experiences and absent-mindedness were both directly predictive of poor general mental health. However, when the variance associated with fantasy proneness was extracted, only absent-mindedness continued to make a unique contribution to general mental health scores. In conjunction with previous studies, these findings suggest that the so-called “benign” phenomenon of fantasy proneness is an artefact of dissociative experiences as indexed by the DES. Although this suggests that there may be limitations to the DES’s utility as a screening instrument for dissociative pathology, further systematic study is clearly warranted in this area.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1. Introduction

The last twenty years has witnessed a resurgence of interest in the phenomena of dissociation. In the last decade, no other area within clinical psychology has engendered as much contention as dissociation and the dissociative disorders (e.g. Cohen, Berzoff, & Elin, 1995; Merskey, 1995). As a result, there has been a significant increase in the amount of research and case reports conducted in this area. Most of this research has focused on the relationship between dissociation and measures of childhood trauma, as well as various measures of symptomatology and psychopathology.

Although a history of childhood trauma and abuse has been associated with several different psychiatric complaints, several researchers (e.g. Braun, 1984; Kluft, 1985; Putnam, 1986; van der Kolk, 1987) have found traumatic experiences to be specifically linked to the development of dissociative disorders. For example, Putnam (1986) found that out of a sample of 100 individuals with multiple personality disorder, 97% reported past episodes of childhood abuse. Additionally, surveys conducted on individuals with a range of psychiatric illnesses (e.g. Putnam et al., 1996; Rauschenberger & Lynn, 1995; Saxe et al., 1993) indicate that roughly 25% of the clinical population exhibit elevated levels of dissociative tendencies. With regards to the prevalence of dissociative experiences in non-clinical populations, survey results (e.g. Mulder et al., 1998; Putnam et al, 1996; Ross, Joshie, & Currie, 1990) estimate that about 5-6% experience extremely high levels.

Despite extensive research in this area, there are still major gaps in the literature regarding the relationship between dissociative experiences and a whole host of related variables, including; childhood trauma and abuse, various psychopathologies, and personality characteristics such as fantasy proneness and absent-mindedness. The interrelationships between dissociative experience, fantasy proneness and absent-mindedness, as well as each

phenomenon's relative contributions to predicting psychological distress are among the primary objectives of the current study.

1.1.2. Purposes of the Present Study

1. To examine the relationship among dissociative experiences, fantasy proneness, absent-mindedness and general mental health.
2. To ascertain whether age, gender and/or cultural differences exist in dissociative experiences, fantasy proneness and absent-mindedness.
3. To assess the commonalities between the scales used to measure dissociative experiences, fantasy proneness, and absent-mindedness.

1.1.3. Rationale for the Present Study

The present study aimed to examine the relationship among dissociative experiences, fantasy proneness, absent-mindedness and general mental health. Previous research has been inconsistent and inconclusive with regards to the interrelationships among these three phenomena and how each relates to poor mental health (i.e. psychopathology). There has been much controversy within the current literature as to whether heightened dissociative experiences are in fact indicative of a history of childhood trauma and subsequent dissociative pathology, given clinical and non-clinical findings of there being robust correlations between dissociative experiences and the "so-called" benign personality traits of fantasy proneness and absent-mindedness. Additionally, several researchers (e.g. Cardena, 1994; Frankel, 1990; Ross, 1989; Singer & Sincoff, 1990) have criticised the current conceptualisation of dissociation for being too vague and too broadly defined.

As of yet, there does not appear to be any research that has focused specifically on exploring the interrelationships among all three of these variables, and how they relate (whether in isolation or combination) to general mental health. Thus, in questioning the assumption that the personality correlates of dissociation are benign, the current study aimed to examine these relationships to determine whether high levels of these phenomena are independently related to poor mental health scores, or conversely, whether robust correlations among these variables are more the result of profound overlapping between the

scales used to measure these three phenomena. In other words, are high levels of fantasy proneness indicative of a predilection or vulnerability to mental illness, or are they merely incidental artefacts of dissociation brought about by overlapping in item content? In addition, given a lack of research in these areas, the present study sought to determine whether any age, gender, or cultural differences exist in these three phenomena.

In keeping with previous research, several hypotheses were made. In particular, it was hypothesised that all three of the independent variables (dissociative experiences, fantasy proneness, and absent-mindedness) would be directly related to one another. With regards to gender differences, it was hypothesised that females would have higher levels of overall absent-mindedness than males. It was hypothesised that there would be no gender differences with regards to dissociative experiences and fantasy proneness. With regards to age differences, it was hypothesised that both dissociative experiences and absent-mindedness levels would systematically decrease with increases in age. Although it was hypothesised that there would be no cultural differences in fantasy proneness or absent-mindedness, in line with previous research by Barker-Collo (1994) it was hypothesised that there would be significant cultural differences in the degree of dissociative experiences within the New Zealand sample tested in the current study. Specifically, it was hypothesised that NZ European/Pakeha would have lower levels of dissociative experiences than Māori, who in turn would have lower levels of dissociative experiences than Asian individuals.