Dissociative Identity Disorder and the Nature of the Self

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Abstract.

Dissociative Identity Disorder (formerly Multiple Personality Disorder) has been the subject of much controversy: Are alternative identities most plausibly viewed as alternative selves; fragments of selves; or adopted roleplays? The answer to this question will be shown to be a matter of interpretation; but this need not be taken to imply that selves are the entirely non-realist products of social and narrative construction. Although Dennett explicitly regards selves to be such 'creative fictions' I will attempt to show that it is more consistent with his overall line, and more plausible in general to grant a degree of realism to selves. There may be no fact of the matter as to how many selves there are associated with a single body – but this need not be taken to preclude realism. If we accept a 'multiple systems' version of the intentional stance we can perceive more pattern in these subject's behaviour, thus more charitably making the best sense of their lives.

1 Characterisations of alters and selves

The phenomenon that was until recently known as Multiple Personality Disorder has prompted a variety of accounts as to the metaphysical status of the alternative identities, or alters exhibited by subjects with the disorder. Some theorists have held that the phenomenon shows that we need to reconsider the status and nature of selves in general as it seems that it is possible for subjects to give rise to, or support more than one self e.g., Gillett, (1997); Hacking, (1991); Humphrey and Dennett, (1998); Kolak, (1993). This has led them to conclude that selves are fictions, whether in the 'multiple' individual or in those with a more conventional psychology.

An alternative to this account is to deny that alters are selves. A popular strategy amongst clinicians who treat the disorder is to consider them to be 'aspects', 'segments', or 'parts' of a self. On this view alters are to be seen as fragments that may be blended or fused together to add up to a single self of the sort exhibited by individuals without the disorder e.g., Gleaves, (1996); Kluft, (1988); Putnam, (1989). The other major alternative is to deny that alters are selves, and maintain that there is only one self even in the case of subjects who present with the disorder e.g., Brown, (2001) and Clarke, (1990). There has been a general tendency for theorists who maintain that alters are selves to emphasise that selves are fictions. While the theorists who maintain that alters cannot be regarded as selves often do not explicitly examine the nature of the self, there seems to be an implicit tendency towards realism. The metaphysical status of alters thus seems to be somewhat inversely related to the metaphysical status of selves[1].

[1]I do think that this is a fair characterisation of the main positions although it seems possible to read 'parts' of a self as either not being real in their own right, or as real parts of a real whole. Spanos is one theorist who maintains that alters are role plays, yet would seem to consider a single self to be something of a role play also. I see nothing to prevent either of these theorists agreeing with me in that alters are as real as selves.

2 The reaction to realism

Historically the main way of being a realist about the self was to take a Cartesian view of them. In recent times, however, the notion of a Cartesian Realist self has largely been discredited for two main reasons. The first problem arises with Descartes' dualism; his notion of the self as a non- physical, or immaterial thing. For Descartes the soul, mind, or self is a simple and unified entity that acts as a locus of control. Just how this non-physical self can interact with the physical world is the notorious causal problem for dualists. While some (notably Chalmers, 1996) maintain that dualism is not incompatible with a scientific world view; so long as we broaden our notion of science to include qualitative experience as irreducible; it would be fair to say that the majority of theorists remain unconvinced. Most theorists claim to work within a broadly naturalistic or materialist framework, and by this they seem to mean that there is no immaterial mind or self that acts as a locus of control. The notion of this kind of self is (for the most part) rejected. Often theorists consider themselves non-realists in order to explicitly characterise themselves as rejecting the above variety of realism.

The second reason for the reaction to Cartesianism is Descartes notion of a localised region of the brain that is responsible for executive control. Descartes considered the pineal gland to be the seat of interaction and while this has been ruled out as implausible the majority of theorists draw the greater lesson that there is no localised region that fulfils the role of the mind, self, or 'place where it all comes together'. This realist notion of the self as an entity to be found within the subjects brain has largely fallen into disrepute as theorists are unable to pinpoint an area or pattern whose proper functioning is necessary and sufficient for self-hood. Feinberg, (2001) writes that there is no place in the brain in which 'all the brain's activity converges on "one pontifical cell" '. He goes on to propose a *nested hierarchy* theory of self where

diverse areas of the brain contribute to the consciousness and selfhood that are seen as emergent properties of the normally functioning human brain. He shows us through a series of case studies that the self is not an all or none affair. It can break down or malfunction to differing degrees, and it cannot be the sole product of any one localised region. It seems that the homunculus that is the self is not to be found in a localised region of the brain at all. No neuron, mental module, or pattern of activation seems to constitute a self. Neuroscientists largely agree that there is no localised self to be found in the brain. These varieties of realism are thus held in disrepute.

The materialist intuition that there must be a physiological basis to the phenomena that give rise to talk the self is not disputed. It seems unanimous that the self is (somehow or other) a *product* of neural activity. That physiological changes are physical *causes* of behaviour is not disputed. Non- realists just want to deny that the self will turn out to be one and the same as a set of neural processes. Neuro-physiological accounts of how the behaviour arises that constitutes DID have been offered in terms of competing mental modules (physical structures within the brain), or patterns of activation with respect to firing rates or transmitter levels. What little empirical evidence we have is mixed as to whether the neural activity of DID subjects when switching between alters is qualitatively different from controls (Adler, 1999). When the studies report that there are qualitative differences the interpretations of this finding are hotly disputed, as is the methodology of the study. Non realists deny that the self will turn out to be found in the brain and they emphasise social and narrative processes that they maintain lead to the construction of the self. These notions form the basis of their subsequent accounts. Non-realism about the self has emerged as the dominant position within psychology and indeed philosophy today.

The current emphasis on non-realism with respect to the self may be seen as

a reaction to these discredited varieties of realism outlined above. Because the everyday term 'self' is taken to refer to one of these realist selves, and seeing as it turns out that these realist selves do not exist, some theorists have concluded that this shows us that selves do not exist at all. Most go on to construct a theory of what the self 'really' is, though regard themselves to be non-realists in that (a) they want to divorce themselves from the above varieties of realism, and (b) they believe that the self that they go on to talk about is contrary to our commonsense way of using the term.

We may instead take the line that the everyday term 'self' does not refer to a thing to be found within the brain (or even an immaterial thing not to be found within the brain). This seems the most plausible line to account for the everyday term 'self' as most of us do not have the opportunity to look inside the individual's brains that we attribute self-hood to. Yet we can and do consider individuals to have selves. What we do have access to and what therefore seems the most plausible to consider with respect to self-hood is the behaviour (especially the verbal behaviour) of subjects. This is not to say that the self just is a collection of behaviours, but if behaviour is necessary for our attributions of self-hood to others then it would seem that behaviour is a necessary part to self-hood. Realism may thus be able to get a toehold because the behaviour is real.

Given that we typically attribute one self to normal subjects, the following now becomes our question: Is it the case that individual's with DID have more than one self? Or alternatively, do they not even exhibit one until they are fused? Or, is there but one all along? Even if it turns out that different alters are correlated with different transmitter levels, or different mental modules that gain control of the motor cortex or language production areas, this cannot show us that alters are selves for the same reasons that data on brain activity cannot show us the one self in the brain. The data does not

carry with it instructions as to how we should interpret its significance and so it cannot show us the neurophysiological self or selves in the brain. The behaviour and the brain behaviour of subjects are not enough to tell us how the behaviour should be interpreted. Whether there are no such things as selves, whether there can only be one to a body, or whether there can be more than one is a conceptual or interpretive issue that needs to be decided on theoretical grounds.

The phenomenon usually seems to be interpreted as not implying that the subject has more than one self (usually because of some assumption that necessitates a one-one correlation between selves and brains / bodies), or as showing the fictional side to selves because there turns out to be more than one. I will go on to argue that whether there are one or many selves is largely a matter of interpretation, though in order to maximize rationality it may be more charitable to view these subjects as having more than one self - and to see alters as selves with equivalent metaphysical status to more typical selves. Just because it is indeterminate how many selves there 'really' are does not imply that selves / alters are purely fictional; there is a realist aspect to them that needs to be emphasized in this current climate where non- realism prevails.

3 Dennett's metaphysics of mind

The philosopher Daniel Dennett is best known for his account of intentional states such as belief and desire. He claims in 'Real Patterns', (1998) that he attempts to achieve 'the mid-point between realism and anti-realism' regarding the metaphysical status of intentional states (or alternatively of the mind). It is worthwhile at this point to take a detour into Dennett's metaphysics of mind, as I will go on to maintain that on Dennett's account of

what selves are, the same metaphysical status must apply to them as well. Dennett, (1987) claims that intentional states are visible when we take the *intentional stance* towards a system's behaviour.

The intentional stance consists in a theorist viewing the behaviour of an object in a way so as to attribute intentional states to it. When the theorist views the object in this way 'real patterns' are said to emerge which provide a reality constraint on the theorist's attributions. The truth of the attributions of specific intentional states is subject to the constraints provided by the future behaviour. Future behaviour may lend support to the attributions, or may serve to disconfirm them.

Dennett, (1987) teases apart a realist and fictionalist component:

> While belief is a perfectly objective phenomenon (that apparently makes me a realist), it can be discerned only from the point of view of someone who adopts a certain predictive strategy, and its existence can be confirmed only by an assessment of the success of that strategy (that apparently makes me an interpretationist).

Many took Dennett's early account of intentional states to be instrumentalist, or fictionalist in flavour because of his focus on interpretive attributions over facts of the matter, and his emphasis on behaviour rather than the brain. His response was 'Real Patterns', (1998) where he emphasized the realist aspect to intentional states. He claims that

> the success of folk-psychological prediction, like the success of any prediction, depends on there being some order or pattern in

> the world to exploit... The pattern is discernable in agent's (observable) behaviour when we subject it to 'radical interpretation' from the intentional stance.

He maintains that the pattern is objective; it is real because it gives us 'predictive leverage we can get from no other method', (1998).

Dennett's methodology is interesting in that he attempts to characterise both intentionality and self-hood from an objective, third person perspective. While there may or may not be a distinctive conscious experience that all selves have (the very suggestion is notoriously disputed), and while qualitative states, or qualia may or may not play an important part in determining beliefs or desires, we do not have this kind of access to another individual's mind. In the case of DID one might think that the question as to how many selves there are could be conclusively settled if only we could know how many centres of consciousness there were – but the search for even one of those in terms of neuroscience has proved vastly more difficult than the simple idea suggests. It has proven difficult to the point where based on the lack of scientific evidence many theorists want to deny that selves exist, or are real at all.

We are unable to determine the qualia of another, and so if one considers that qualia determine whether a subject really is a believer or a self there would be no way we could ever know because we could not access the required evidence – we would remain in a solipsistic position with respect to others being conscious, being believers, or being selves. Dennett may be considered to be offering us an alternative way out. He steers clear of elusive qualia for determining evidence, instead redirecting the kind of evidence required by focusing on what we all do have access to – behaviour. Our everyday

notion of the self cannot refer to private subjective experiences for the same reasons it cannot refer to goings-on in the brain. We lack the required access to either and so they cannot play a role in the way in which we choose to apply and withhold the concept of selfhood, (or mind) to others.

4 Dennett's account of the self

So, if the self is not a real thing to be found within the brain, or a distinctive qualitative experience what is it? Dennett, (1992) maintains that a self is an abstractum, or an abstract object, like a centre of gravity.

> The physicist does an interpretation, if you like, of the chair and its behaviour, and comes up with the theoretical abstraction of a centre of gravity... [we are] faced with a similar problem of interpretation. It turns out to be theoretically perspicuous to organize the interpretation around a central abstraction: each person has a self.

Being just any old 'intentional system' is not sufficient for selfhood however, as Dennett, (1987) allows that oil refineries and thermometers qualify as 'intentional systems', or 'true believers' (which some think shows that his account of intentional states is inadequate). Even if we were persuaded it is proper and attribute intentional states to these things, we most decidedly do not want to hold that they qualify as having selves, and (arguably) we would not expect animals to have selves – although some sort of 'rudimentary self' is plausible. Dennett considers

> Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not building dams or spinning webs, but telling stories–

> and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others–and ourselves–about who we are... unlike professional human storytellers [we[do not consciously and deliberately figure out what narratives to tell and how to tell them; like spider webs, our tales are spun by us; our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source.

Language thus enables self-representation, and we may say that this is necessary for fully-fledged self-hood. We tell others, and of course ourselves about ourselves: our likes and dislikes, our plans and expectations, our explanations and memories. We thus take the intentional stance towards our own behaviour, as others take it towards ours, and in taking it towards ourselves we are creating ourselves.

Dennett, (1991) claims that our narratives, or the stories we tell others and ourselves about who we are are spun by us, or more specifically by our brains. He emphasises that he is not implying one conscious agent talking another one into existence - that would be begging the question and would lead to an infinite regress of selves / story tellers. He claims that our stories are instead spun by, or more properly are the products of 'unconscious' or unaware neurones in our brains. He uses the example of the termite colony to show that what can seem to be highly integrated and coherent group behaviour - even to the point where some theorists have posited a 'group soul', is in actuality the behaviour of many independent organisms 'largely doing their own thing'. They independently work towards a common end goal and thus we can legitimately predict the behaviour of them viewed as a group, or single system.

This parallels the human brain in that the brain, instead of being a simple, unified thing, or even an organised collection of simpler modules is simply

(on the physical level) collections of individual neurones, each one doing its own thing. Dennett's 'Multiple Drafts' model of consciousness, (1991) has consciousness presented as emerging in the brain when patterns of activation persist for long enough. It is like several lines of sub-conscious thought run concurrently and what actually makes it to consciousness is the most persistent line. There are struggles for ascendency and the track, or stream is subject to change. This makes conscious thought (and indeed unconscious thought) subservient to brain processes - conscious thought depends on which brain process is the 'most persistent' at any given time, but this account requires no conscious editor to chose between the lines of thought. The result is consciousness that has emerged from simpler organic processes that are not themselves intelligent conscious agents.

What is relevant about this account is that Dennett maintains that self narratives are not consciously spun by pre-existing selves. With respect to alters one criticism of them is that they must require a pre-existing self to strategically adopt the role, narrate them, and thus spin them into existence. On Dennett's account a conscious self is not a requisite for a self, and thus an alternative self to develop. It thus appears to at least be conceivable that alternative selves could develop independently of one another in that more than one could arise from a single body.

5 Indeterminacy: It's implications for realism

Dennett is very keen to emphasize the realist side to intentional states and he shies away from classification as an instrumentalist regarding the mind. It seems that one could argue (although Dennett does not) that we should

not completely abandon realism with respect to the self on the same grounds that we should not completely abandon realism with respect to intentional states. The realist part to Dennett's account of intentionality is the objective behaviour, and objective patterns in behaviour. There is also a realist aspect in that future behaviour serves (in most instances) to either support the attributions of specific mental states, or disconfirm them. I think that the realist aspect to intentional states must also apply to selves, even though Dennett seems quite happy to regard them as fictions. It seems to be consistent with Dennett's overall line to likewise claim that the realist part to the self is, once again, the objective behaviour (or objective patterns in behaviour). To maintain consistency the stance he takes on one must apply to the other also, as he has pointed out that they are both theorists' constructs designed for and maintained by their utility in the prediction and explanation of behaviour from the intentional stance.

In 'The Self as a Centre of Narrative Gravity', (1992) he writes that selves may be indeterminate and that

> this indeterminacy is a fundamental property of fictional objects which strongly distinguishes them from another sort of object scientists talk about: theoretical entities, or what Reichenbach called illata–inferred entities, such as atoms, molecules and neutrinos. A logician might say that the 'principle of bivalence' does not hold for fictional objects.

A worry is that here he is attempting to distinguish between theoretical, or inferred entities (such as centres of gravity), and fictional entities (selves) on the grounds of indeterminacy. Concreta too can be indeterminate though, and we do not want to regard them any the less real for it. There may be

no fact of the matter as to where one mountain ends and another begins if they are side by side, however this does not show us that mountains are fictions. Dennett also allows that intentional states can be indeterminate, yet he explicitly regards them to be theoretical entities, and he is keen to emphasise the realist aspect to them. Does the principle of bivalence hold for intentional states? What about questions regarding where one mountain ends and another begins? Indeterminacy need not imply non-realism.

6 The indeterminacy of attributions of intentional states and self-hood

Dennett provides an account of two rival theorists, Smith and Jones, who are attempting to predict the behaviour of the same subject. He claims that they 'agree on the general shape of this individual's collection of beliefs (and desires etc.) but because of their different idealizations of the pattern, they do not agree point for point'. While the different theorists might predict different behaviours, so it would seem that one interpretation might emerge as the better (that is to say more useful one), that might not be the case in principal. He notes:

> I see that there could be two different systems of belief attribution to an individual that differed substantially in what they attributed – even in yielding substantially different predictions of the individual's future behaviour – and yet where no deeper fact of the matter could establish that one was a description of the individual's real beliefs and the other not... The choice of a pattern would indeed be up to the observer, a matter to be decided on idiosyncratic pragmatic grounds.

Let us consider selves to be attributions that are made on the basis of a subject's behaviour (especially their verbal behaviour where they attribute a self to themselves). Because of the indeterminacy of attributions it follows that different theorists could have differing theories as to how many selves there are with respect to one body. One theorist could maintain that there was one self, and another that there was many. There may be no further fact of the matter that could decide between these two interpretations.

In 'Speaking for OurSelves', (1998) he writes:

> suppose, at different times, different subsystems within the brain produce 'clusters' of speech that simply cannot easily be interpreted as the output of a single self. Then – as a Bible scholar may discover when working on the authorship of what is putatively a single-authored text – it may turn out that the clusters make best sense when attributed to different selves.

Interpretation seems to be all-important, and the factor driving our interpretation is the desire to make the 'best sense' out of the behaviour (including verbal behaviour) of subjects. It seems that a major factor in deciding whether one or many selves are present is a matter of interpretation. Suppose a system's behaviour taken as a whole appears only minimally consistent - erratic, changeable, inconsistent, even unpredictable – a lot of noise must be budgeted for. But there may be more useful patterns there for the innovative observer to discern. Perhaps there may be discernable pattern in the noise, and the subject may be predictably unpredictable so to speak. A system, for example, may be better viewed as not just one system, but as several different systems. The unpredictability may lie more in uncertainty as to which system may be in control at a given time (although patterns may

be discernable here too). The multiple systems view could have predictive leverage over the single systems version in that it budgets for considerably more pattern and less noise, that is to say it is more useful, not more real.

One thing that the intentional stance requires is a 'rational decider'. There needs to be a rational decider to co-ordinate the beliefs and desires and to act from there. With respect to a self we seem to be making the attribution that the rational decider is largely the same, and is largely consistent over time. That seems to amount to the content of the beliefs and goals being largely the same, or at least evolving in comprehensible ways. It also seems to involve the notion that the beliefs are largely non-contradictory. In terms of the decision to view the subject as having one or many selves we may say that it is more charitable to maximize rationality, and rationality can be maximized by viewing the subjects as having separate centres of narrative gravity that are internally largely consistent and evolve comprehensibly but are mutually incompatible. The alternative is that rationality is not optimal and we have to budget for more noise. In the descriptive sense it may be practical to consider these subjects to have more than one self.

The attribution of one or many centres of narrative gravity may be indeterminate – there may be no further fact of the matter that could decide between the competing hypotheses of multiple centres of narrative gravity and an ardent refusal to describe the subject's behaviour in this manner. Even if one hypothesis explained and predicted more behaviour and less noise than the other both would 'get rich' as Dennett puts it, simply by one budgeting for more noise. The noisier pattern would make allowances for 'unpredictable' behaviour, whereas the other would see pattern in the noise. Even though one may emerge as having more pattern Dennett explicitly states that it does not follow that it is more real. So with respect to intentional states if there are two competing belief-desire ascriptions that predict behaviour then they

must both be true (in that they are both derived from the theorist's valid interpretation of real pattern), and so as to the question as to whether the subject really has one or more selves there too there may be no fact of the matter.

There seems to be no reason why a single brain or body cannot give rise to more than one self in principal unless one adheres to some sort of biological notion of the self that restricts selves and bodies (or brains) to a one-one correlation necessarily. Brown, (2001) does this with his account of DID by holding an Animalist account of the self where there is, at maximum, one self per human animal. His motivation for this is to avoid 'moral problems' (unspecified) that he believes may result in taking alters to be selves, and he takes the 'reification' of alters to be 'metaphysically extravagant'[2]. Aside from these two motivations he does not provide an argument for animalism and a one-one correlation; rather this presupposition motivates his account. Biology has traditionally had less to do with the notion of a self, however, and more to do with the related notion of a person, which seems to also be the notion more tied up with moral rights and responsibilities. Those who are inclined to take some sort of biological line might find commissurotomy a more likely phenomenon with respect to challenging ones intuitions that selves and brains must enter into a strict one-one correlation.

If it turns out that different mental modules are responsible for the different patterns in behaviour that constitute the alters then this would seem to be a similar sort of case though. Or perhaps one specifically wants to attempt to draw a bodily criterion into the notion of self (as Brown does). The problem

[2]Although it does not seem to be metaphysically extravagant for the claim is that there are simply more tokens of selves than we previously realised – it is not another kind of 'stuff' different in kind that is being postulated. The criticism of metaphysical extravagance may be better applied to those who view alters to be different in kind from selves.

with this is that the body is obviously not sufficient as a criterion when one considers the possibility (in principal) of body swaps and the inclination most of us have to say that the self 'follows' the brain, and is no different for a different body. The bodily criterion here thus seems to be irrelevant – many claim that it is not necessary - with respect to the self. This is not, of course, support for the claim that disembodied selves are possible. Presumably it is necessary for there to be some sort of physical basis that gives rise to the self; it just does not seem to be terribly relevant which body it is so long as it can function in the world in similar ways, thus giving rise to similar patterns in behaviour.

So the three alternative positions that we began with were that (a) selves are fictions (as explicitly endorsed by Dennett); (b) alters are different in kind to selves but may be blended or fused together to result in a self; and; (c) alters are not selves, rather they are role-plays. While the latter claim seems to suggest that there is more to the self than an adopted role play which seems to implicitly require a degree of realism with respect to the self; non-realism about selves has emerged as the dominant line. Here I have attempted to show that it is a plausible alternative to disagree with all of the above and maintain that alters constitute selves and that there is a realist aspect to selves. Realism of the Cartesian variety may well be untenable, but behaviour must be the basis of our attributions of selfhood to others and so may be seen to provide an aspect of realism that constrains our attributions.

I think that there is a decision to be made as to whether we interpret the behaviour of these subjects as indicating that they have one self or many. We are understandably biased towards positing one centre of narrative gravity wherever possible, as one seems sufficient for explaining and predicting the behaviour of the majority of the population. In some cases, however, there may be a predictive and explanatory advantage to positing more than one

self to a subject. This interpretation may be seen as more charitable with respect to maximising the subjects' rationality, and explaining and predicting more of their behaviour. On Dennett's account this does not imply that this interpretation is 'more real', but I think that if more of the behaviour can be explained and predicted then this would seem to be a good reason for considering the multiple systems version of the intentional stance a better theory of these subjects' behaviour than the alternative.

6.1 Summary of the main positions as to the metaphysical status of alters

1. Gillett, (1997); Hacking, (1991); Humphrey and Dennett, (1998); Kolak, (1993).
   (a) Alters are as real as selves.
   (b) Selves are fictions.

2. Gleaves, (1996); Kluft, (1988); Putnam, (1989).
   (a) Alters are aspects or segments of a self that may be blended or fused together to result in a single self.
   (b) Implicit realism with respect to the status of a self.

3. Brown, (2001) and Clarke, (1990).
   (a) Alters are role plays or fictions and thus do not constitute selves.
   (b) Selves are thus (implicitly) required to be 'more real' than mere fictions or role plays.

6.2 Summary of my position

1. Alters have equivalent metaphysical status to more typical selves (1a)
2. There is a realist aspect to the self or selves that may arise from a single body. (Selves and alters are to some extent real) (2b, 3b)

6.3 Diagnostic crieria for 300.14 Dissociative Identity Disorder*

1. The presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states (each with its own relatively enduring pattern of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the environment and self).

2. At least two of these identities or personality states recurrently take control of the person's behaviour.

3. Inability to recall important personal information that is too extensive to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness.

4. The disturbance is not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., blackouts or chaotic behaviour during Alcohol Intoxication) or a general medical condition (e.g., complex partial seizures). **Note:** In children, the symptoms are not attributable to imaginary playmates or other fantasy play.

* Criteria cited from the *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders DSM-IV-TR*, (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p.529.)

7 References

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