

'And we are a human being': Coproduced reflections on person-centred psychotherapy in plural and dissociative identity

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Abstract

In this reflexive case-study, 'Billie', an integrative psychotherapist, and her therapist, Nicola, offer a coproduced account of Billie's lived experience of dissociative identity. Challenging the medicalised 'fragmentation towards integration' discourse, Billie, her parts, and Nicola coproduce a person-centred 'exclusion towards inclusion' approach. The authors propose the term 'plural identity', situating the experience less as a disorder, and more as a way of being human. They present verbatim extracts of their therapeutic work, with parallel commentary and postsession discussion, to illustrate their developing, person-centred and coproduced approach towards intrapsychic inclusion. They conclude that inclusion consists in unconditionally valuing three prevailing constituents in plural identity: the individual parts of self; the ecological system; and the differentiation between parts. This can result in growth for all parts, including parts that initially appear counter to growth, and allows the lived experience of the client to be honoured, not pathologised.

KEYWORDS

configurations, coproduction, dissociation, lived experience, person-centred

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this article, we offer a reflexive example of working therapeutically with plural identity; not to achieve integration, but towards the inclusion and acceptance of parts of self. This is an evolving, idiographic and person-centred therapeutic endeavour that we coproduce in our therapist and client partnership. As such, we do not offer this as a generalisable model of treatment, for we are not engaged in treatment. Instead, we feel that our learning and approach may prompt other client-therapist dyads to explore the phenomenology of their own inner plural-identities with more confidence and creativity. We offer this work as potential inspiration and validation for other people living with plural-identity and we hope that we will help to dispel some of the fear and unnecessary judgement about this beautiful way of being human. We found the process of writing this article to deepen our metacommunication, and to be a political exercise in authenticity and in advocacy for the humanity of persons experiencing plural selfhood.

2 | BACKGROUND TO THE WORK

Dissociative identity disorder (DID) is a contested and controversial diagnosis that is beset by disputes over its aetiology (Dorahy et al., 2014) and its treatment. There are currently no agreed National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines for working with DID and, consequently, services exist on the fringes of mainstream National Health Service (NHS) provision (Floris & McPherson, 2015). The fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) offers five salient diagnostic criteria for DID: depersonalisation, derealisation, amnesia (as forgetting outside of the normal range of human experience), identity confusion and identity alteration (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In practice, this means that a person may experience two or more distinct identity states within themselves, which exist as personalities possessing their own agency, characteristics, knowledge, perspectives, moods, behaviour patterns, tastes and memories, and which may or may not be consciously aware of the other identities (Huntjens et al., 2016; Maiese, 2016).

Sometimes viewed with suspicion, as an iatrogenic or hysterical condition caused by patient-suggestibility, more recently, a strong body of evidence has arisen to support DID as an empirically verified adaptive response to overwhelming stress, often as a result of severe childhood trauma (see Leonard & Tiller, 2015; Sar, Dorahy, & Krüger, 2017). People experiencing DID are not more suggestible or more fantasy-prone than any other group (Vissia et al., 2016); yet, they are frequently assumed to be imagining their own experience. Opposing this 'fantasy model' of dissociative identity phenomena, the more current 'trauma model' highlights dissociation as a reaction to extreme threat rather than an inherent pathology of personality (Floris & McPherson, 2015). Identity dissociation represents an adaptive reaction to an inescapable threat or danger in which flight or fight is impossible (Brand, Loewenstein, & Spiegel, 2014), establishing an intrapsychic resolution to extreme ambivalence (Maiese, 2016) and allowing the preservation of multiple self-states that exist naturally in children, but which tend to be less obvious or present in adults (Itzkowitz, Chefetz, Hainer, Hopenwasser, & Howell, 2015). Where an event is overwhelming, and feelings about the event are inadmissible to the self or impossible to resolve (perhaps incorporating deep confusion about whether to live or die), other identities can form, electing to bear the experience and carry some of the ambivalent feelings, leaving the other parts of self able to survive and even thrive.

Neuroscience discoveries further support the assertion that the human mind is naturally 'multiple and discontinuous' rather than 'singular and bonded' (Itzkowitz et al., 2015). The existence of multiple self-states (configurations or parts) has also commonly been observed within the counselling and psychotherapeutic literature (e.g., Mearns, McLeod, & Thorne, 2013), and this common phenomenon is increasingly being regarded as existing on the same spectrum as those dissociative identity phenomena arising in the clinical setting (see, for instance Isler, 2017; Itzkowitz et al., 2015). For this reason, some clinicians and people with lived experience of dissociative identity question the validity of the term 'disorder' (Isler, 2017; Itzkowitz et al., 2015). As commonly attested in

critiques of the medical model, the term 'disorder' focuses on an individual's struggles rather than their strengths and resources; thus adding to their sense of shame and powerlessness. 'Disordered' individuals come implicitly to be blamed for their suffering, as the focus of attention is shifted to what is wrong with the individual rather than what has happened to them. Our choice of words and the language we use can determine how we come to view ourselves and those around us (Dillon, 2019). Pathologising emotional distress increases discrimination and negative attitudes towards individuals resulting in harassment, bullying and social isolation (Sidley, 2019). The authors of the current article agree with this critique, and prefer the term plural identity rather than DID to describe the experience of multiple self-states.

The stigma around plural identity has been exacerbated by sensational reporting in the media, and in popular fictionalisation of the experience (Zeligman et al., 2017). Prejudice results in difficulties identifying and managing the experience (Leonard & Tiller, 2015), as well as creating 'iatrogenic doubt' within mental health professions and patients, who both come to question the validity of lived experience, resulting in further barriers to support (Floris & McPherson, 2015). Previously, the perceived wisdom of professionals (International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation) pointed towards 'integration' as being the gold standard of success in treating plural identity. However, for many of those who experience dissociative identity, integration can be problematic and elusive. There is an inherent danger in being too definitive. Broady (2020) stated 'forcing the integration issue actually causes the creation of new dissociative walls, which means greater separation, not integration'. Consequently, advocacy groups have started organising to share information and develop a pride-full, safe community (Zeligman et al., 2017). Within this online community (cf., *Discussing Dissociation*, *First Person Plural* and *PODS*), many are opposed to 'integration' and their primary goal being 'collaboration', where an intrapsychic acceptance of all parts is invited, leading to better understanding, communication and teamwork. Whilst the ISST-D acknowledges that for some individuals, collaboration between parts maybe more realistic and acceptable, it continues to promote unitary identity over plural identity. The authors of the current article argue that plural identity is not a second-best option but an adaptive response to trauma that, when worked with, can become an asset and a genuine expression of the human experience.

3 | BILLIE'S STATEMENT

There was a time when I struggled to make meaningful connections with others and had a sense of being disconnected from myself and the world. With the exception of a few close friends and my therapist, my dissociation was barely noticed. Episodes of forgetfulness were dismissed as 'having a lot on my mind', and times when I zoned out as being the result of a 'bad night's sleep' or 'too much partying'. I worked hard to hide it from others and myself.

Fast forward 10 years. I am now a qualified integrative therapist working in private practice, where I see clients for both short- and long-term therapy. As my clients enter the therapy room and the work begins, I am fleetingly aware of those behind the mirror, watching and listening as the session unfurls. They pick up on the nuances of both the client and myself, making notes as the therapeutic encounter plays out. As the session ends and the client leaves the room, those who have witnessed the session emerge and a dialogue begins. However, this is not systemic therapy. The mirror is not in the room: it exists in my head. Those behind the mirror are not therapists or medical professionals; they are 'parts', 'parts' of myself (see Figure 1 and Table 1 for an overview of the 'parts').

I am aware that many medical professionals and trauma therapists support the idea of integration. However, for myself and many of the clients with whom I work, the goal is primarily that of collaboration, where an acceptance of all 'parts' is created, leading to greater teamwork, communication and understanding. Creating and maintaining a team approach takes time and hard work. I continue to engage in personal therapy as it provides an opportunity for all 'parts' to be heard and understood, and facilitates healing for all.



FIGURE 1 'The Team'. Left to right: Qo, Libby, Rebel, Kip, Effy, Michael and Ori

TABLE 1 Parts within the system of Billie

Name	Gender	Job/function	Special notes
Qo	F	unclear	Preverbal
Libby	F	Organiser	Maintains order
Rebel	F	Protector	Self-destruct tendencies
Kip	M	Calmer	Playful and innocent
Effy	F	Nurturer/soother	Takes care of everyone's needs
Michael	M	Secret keeper	Detailed memories for all
Ori	M	Manager/theorist	Looked up to, knowledgeable
Lurkers	unclear	unclear	unclear Whether an introject

4 | NICOLA'S STATEMENT

Early into the therapy, I intuited that Billie had parts of self that were more firmly differentiated than my usual experience of more fluid aspects of self. Over time, these parts of self have spent hours in my therapy room—talking, drawing, asking me questions and exploring their unique perspective with me. All of them are my clients. I realise that other therapists might be curious to know how it feels to work with a person who has an inner system of plural identities, and I feel lucky to be able to share some of that experience here.

Primarily, my experience is that I like and cherish Billie and all her parts-of-self as individuals, and as a whole. It is a strange paradox that Billie's inner world is both much more complex and much more straightforward than the ones I usually explore with so-called 'non-dissociative' clients. Billie is largely aware of all the perspectives and views that belong to her team members. Where she is ambivalent about something, such as how we proceed with a particular therapeutic challenge, the arguments for and against a course of action are identifiable very directly. We can ask, simply, what Rebel (their protector) thinks or feels, what Ori (their manager and theorist) knows and what Effy (their nurturer and soother) thinks is important to bear in mind. Their combined wisdom, even (and perhaps especially) when they disagree, is considerable. It is more, I think, than Billie and I could summon up by ourselves. Many times, I have silently or outwardly expressed my gratitude for a timely caveat from Rebel, or a reminder of compassion from Effy, or some uplifting joy felt by Kip. So, I feel, very often, as if I am working with a group. I track the discussion, support mutual understanding and try to ensure that everyone is included.

Whenever I have been alone with one of Billie's team members for a period of uninterrupted time, it has been both moving and unremarkable in that it is like working with any young person. If you have worked with children or teenagers, you will know that it can be very beautiful work in which change can happen with sudden ease. Billie's parts of self are all unique persons, with their own concerns, feelings and character. They are like all the other young people I have met and counselled; except in the one respect—they are all part of a team within Billie.

5 | TRANSCRIPT EXTRACTS WITH COMMENTARY

Billie: What follows are extracts taken from three of my personal therapy sessions. Throughout the extracts, Nicola and I comment and reflect on the challenges and opportunities these sessions presented both on a personal and professional level. The square-bracketed comments are from some of the 'parts' who were also present in these sessions.

6 | EXTRACT 1

Billie's team, as it stands, has developed from a collection of roughly independent parts of self, to a group of persons who work together. Everyone is different; those differences are prized and the variety is welcomed. We all, after all, have a multitude of responses to events and myriad ways of feeling about things. Together, the team within Billie forms a formidable group of fun, talented and wise people. Everyone has a job and everyone is needed. But outside of this team, in Billie's dim awareness, is a group of parts that she keeps away from the team. They are shadowy figures who insult her and jeer at her, and try to bully her into following a rulebook of behaviour built during her childhood. She calls them 'the lurkers'. She is sometimes scared of them, sometimes angry at them and sometimes cowed by them. At the point of this following transcript (see Table 2), it feels to her like time to somehow make sense of them, and perhaps to let them go.

6.1 | Discussion—valuing all the parts of self

Billie's reflection: This extract highlights the contradictory feelings and ideas I experienced within the team. I have learnt that ignoring parts of myself only serves to strengthen their position and how they present themselves. To achieve the changes I want and improve the relationship I have with the 'lurkers', I need to accept those parts as they are and provide them with the conditions they need to grow (Gonzalez, 2018; Rowan, 2010).

Nicola's intervention of verbalising Rebel's position, although painful, helps to remind me of my responsibility to all parts. Everyone's position is valid, their experiences and voices needs to be heard. This is a collaborative process and all parts have a voice.

It seems to me that this is a crossroads. I have a choice. I can keep up the barriers I have spent a lifetime creating or I can slowly lower the drawbridge and let the 'lurkers' come in. I need to be mindful that this may cause some disruption to the system and put in place a safety net for all of our 'parts'. I need to take note that not all 'parts' are on board and they require space and time. I need to trust in the process.

Nicola's reflection: For me, this extract demonstrates the phenomenon that the therapist may experience a deeper connection of empathy with one part than another, even where that part is not 'upfront' but perhaps, especially, where that part wants to be 'upfront' and involved in the discussion. In particular, this happens during moments of 'crossroads', where ambivalence is being loudly voiced by different parts of the team. In this extract, I felt it as my responsibility to amplify the unspoken elements of Billie's inner conflict. This consists in my responsibility to all of Billie's parts. Rebel's purpose being to protect Billie, my own safeguarding part allied strongly

TABLE 2 Transcript–Excerpt 1

Transcript	Commentary
<i>B: Who are the lurkers?</i>	
<i>N: Who are they? That is ...</i>	
<i>B: ... What do they want? ...</i>	
<i>N: [talking over B] ... the million dollar question right now ... What do they want is another good question.</i>	<p>Billie is not sure if the lurkers are a collection of introjected words and behaviours, from her early abuse experiences. Or, as Ori argues, if they are parts of self, like the other parts in the team.</p> <p>I hear the following context in the question, 'What do they want? To harm Billie and her team? To be heard? To do a job, like the other parts?'</p>
<i>B: So many questions.</i>	I felt overwhelmed by all the questions the team were asking and fearful of the answers.
<i>[silence]</i>	
<i>N: Do you have a sense of what they want?</i>	Discovering what they want, might help to establish what they are. Sometimes a direct question like this can prompt an answer from a part, because it invites discussion with the part itself. But, I am perhaps rushing the process.
<i>[Rebel : Back off.]</i> <i>B: They don't feel threatening. But ... mmm ... they are worried.</i>	Rebel is very loud at this point and I am aware that she is trying to come 'upfront'. I feel conflicted because her function is to protect the system. However, this degree of protection is no longer required.
<i>N: ... That they might just be fooling you or playing ...</i>	I articulate the deeper fear of being tricked by apparently 'safe' people, and then hurt. I recall the traumatic instances in Billie's past, where this has happened.
<i>B: There are people like that, there are people that look real nice and then they're arseholes.</i>	
<i>N: Yep ... definitely.</i>	I am thinking along the same lines, and offer this firm agreement to show that. I feel that Billie knows that I know what she is considering.
<i>B: It's a bit worrying 'cause we don't feel in control. What happens if they attack, we don't feel we've got the power anymore.</i>	I needed to voice my anxiety and feelings of vulnerability.
<i>N: ... Where's it gone? Did you use to have it but now don't or ... ?</i>	Billie's statement about her loss of power worries me, and I wonder what has happened to cause this. Have I missed something?
<i>B: Before, they were back there. A long way back. They've come forward ... maybe we fucked up ... don't know.</i>	I am remembering Rebel's words of warning and can feel she is close by.
<i>N: That's Rebel, partly Rebel talking ... is it?</i>	I recognise the 'fucked up' as Rebel's voice, and check this out to be sure. If Rebel is upfront, perhaps we should be alert to danger, as her role is to protect Billie.
<i>B: Feels like we should mmm chase them off ... Rules.</i>	
<i>N: I was just going to say it also feels like Rebel might just kind of fucking storm in there and say give me that fucking rule book and take it and bring it out ...</i>	I use Rebel's words to let her know that I am with her too, aware of her and acknowledging her role.

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Transcript	Commentary
B: <i>We've broken rules in here and we're ok. Nobody mmm ... nobody beat us up.</i>	I say this out loud more for myself than the others. I need reassurance.
N: <i>Yeah.</i>	I affirm that this is a safe space.
B: <i>This is a safe place. [Rebel : If you let the lurkers in they'll trash everything. It's not safe. You are gullible and it always ends badly.]</i>	
N: <i>Yep. (pause) The lurkers did a bit. Tried to beat you up with words.</i>	I feel duty-bound to point out that there have been times when Billie has been punished in the sessions, not by me, but by the 'lurkers'. I instantly regret this intervention, which derails Billie's process. It comes from empathising more strongly with Rebel at this point.
Rebel : <i>Ha ... this is what we are saying. You can't trust the lurkers.]</i>	I wonder, could that be the 'lurkers' job? They keep me on the straight and narrow. When I share my truths or go against the rules, they become abusive and use those 'words' they know will shut me down. The words are designed to shame me into silence. Maybe it was thought that by sticking to the rules and behaving as wanted by others, I would avoid getting hurt more. That rule book is old and no longer has a place.
B: <i>They use their [the abusers'] words. Sometimes we can ignore those words.</i>	
[Ori : <i>They are not introjects.</i>]	
[Rebel : <i>If you're going to break the rules, just get on with it.</i>]	
[Kip : <i>We don't like those words.</i>]	
[Rebel : <i>I will have to pick up the pieces again]</i>	

with her and made it difficult to hear and respond empathically to Billie's developing courage. The resulting confusion of voices within Billie indicates that I have disrupted the equilibrium, to some extent, rather than promoting it. And yet, Billie takes this amplification of the ambivalence and uses it to move forward.

7 | SESSION 2

In a later session, Billie explores making tentative contact with the lurkers, who now appear like small children, sitting on a wall, swinging their legs and quietly watching our discussion. They have stopped using the words that hurt Billie. This extract (Table 3) is taken from near the beginning of the session.

7.1 | Discussion—valuing the ecology of the system

Nicola's reflection: Proximity and distance are key elements of how Billie's world is constructed. At 2, I am interested in these questions of location. The phenomenology of the inner world is both its structure and its process. It will have significance where in the inner space Billie is in relation to the 'lurkers', and where they are in relation to everybody else. Proximity implies closeness, and closeness is, as all therapists know, potentially a blessing or a curse. Bringing the inner space directly into the discussion achieves two things. Primarily it allows for an articulation of the internal relationships, such that both Billie and I understand the ecology of the team better. Second, it sometimes prompts changes. Perhaps one part is too close to another, leading to a leaking of feelings from one to another, or perhaps a part needs the closeness of a different part, for company or nurturing. So, I often

TABLE 3 Transcript—Excerpt 2

Transcript	Commentary
<p>B: <i>The lurkers are here. We've tried sitting with them. Which isn't easy.</i></p>	
<p>N: <i>How do you mean sitting with them?</i></p>	<p>I am not sure what Billie's comment means. Have the lurkers been allowed into the safe space of the team, or has Billie left the safe space to sit with them? Alternatively, does Billie mean that she is sitting with their feelings, as she does with clients?</p>
<p>B: <i>Mmm ... sitting alongside them [Rebel: Push them out is best we don't need them or anyone else.]</i></p>	
<p>N: <i>Mmmm</i></p>	<p>I tentatively understand. This is about sitting with a person's pain.</p>
<p>B: <i>Because that's what we do with clients if they're ... when they struggle with something. Then we kind of just sit with them don't we.</i></p>	
<p>N: <i>Do you feel that the lurkers are struggling?</i></p>	<p>I want to acknowledge the emerging vulnerability of the lurker parts</p>
<p>B: <i>Yeh. It's like they speak but we don't really pick it up or I'm not sure if we want to pick it up. Don't know. So, we thought, well if we have a client like that, we sit with them, so why can't we sit with the lurkers?</i></p>	
<p>N: <i>[pause]</i> <i>What's it like?</i></p>	<p>I ask this question as one therapist to another, 'what is it like to sit with this person?'</p>
<p>B: <i>Uncomfortable. We get like that at work too though ... if people aren't speaking. Silence is ok for a while, but it's not the most comfortable mmm feeling. Just worried we will scare them off if we say anything or make a move. [Ori: more research, more books is all we are saying.]</i></p>	
<p>[Rebel: Who else is going to make us safe?]</p>	<p>It feels bizarre to make myself vulnerable in order to try and establish a connection with the 'lurkers'. Previously they have used their words to attack me. However, wanting to make a meaningful connection with others is a natural human response (Gonzalez, 2018). Taking that risk outweighs the alternative of remaining disconnected. Sometimes I need to remind myself and our parts, that as we heal our resilience increases. When connections damage us now, it is no longer permanent. We can survive.</p>
<p>[silence, while Billie reaches out to touch the pebbles that we use to represent her parts]</p>	
<p>B: <i>So, what to do with the lurkers?</i> <i>That felt weird then.</i></p>	
<p>N: <i>What did?</i></p>	<p>I feel unsure about what is going on within Billie's inner frame. I feel her frustration.</p>
<p>B: <i>Putting our hand out, it's like were going to squidge them. How long do we sit on the branch?</i></p>	<p>I feel not only Rebel's impatience but my own as well.</p>
<p>N: <i>Well it strikes me that you're inching towards each other anyway. I mean there's already a huge shift in what they're doing and how they're behaving and ...</i></p>	<p>Sometimes I offer process-reflection and feedback about the work I see Billie and her team doing. This often creates a realistic soothing for the smaller parts in Billie's team. However, I think this is probably a rescuing intervention, despite its truth. My agenda is for patience.</p>

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Transcript	Commentary
B: Yeh	
N: ... and who they are.	
B: They haven't been abusive at all for weeks now [Kip: Can be friends and play and stuff.]	Their abusive words have been ever present until this point. I can feel the quiet in my head.
[Rebel: If they want a fight we will fight.]	
N: Mmm. So, it's not as if shifts aren't happening just because you're not communicating directly with them.	I pursue my rescuing point, doggedly.
B: That's a weird thing too.	
N: Yeah	
B: You know like ... it feels kind of weird not having them be abusive.	I feel anxious and physically 'twitchy'.
N: Yeah	
B: Does that make sense? It's not always comfortable. You think it's going to be comfortable but sometimes it isn't. It makes us a bit more hypervigilant sometimes. We know the theory because mmm we all know that don't we. We learn that at school, and we learn it in the books. And you see it with clients sometimes like mmm like it's too comfortable, so it doesn't feel safe.	A wave of shame washed over me as I spoke. How do you admit that any form of abuse feels safer, more comfortable. I immediately wanted to push the words back down my throat.
N: Mmm	
B: See that's what's crazy.	
N: That there's a part of you that felt safe with it?	I understand that the old way of being feels safer somehow.
B: Yeh it's crazy that. I know that, if I work with people, but can't do it to ourselves.	

find myself exploring the phenomenology of locations and distances. As a creative adaptation, Billie has selected several distinct pebbles to represent her parts, and will lay them out on the table to describe the social ecology of her inner world, sometimes adjusting them throughout the session. This helps me to inhabit her inner space with her, as best as I am able.

When approaching new parts of self, it is also important to bear in mind the ecology and relative stability of the system as it stands. Billie's 'lurkers', when they are verbally abusing her, represent a form of safety. When we experience treatment that is beyond what humans deserve and can tolerate, it is easier to regard oneself as inhuman. In this way, we can make relative sense of what happened to us. We reinforce this self-concept whenever we can, reminding ourselves that we are bad, that we are abnormal and that we invited the torture.

Inclusion of previously excluded parts can disrupt this equilibrium, even when conducted in tentative steps. What might it mean for those self-hating parts of ourselves to receive compassion? It might mean that those parts are somehow deserving of warmth and acceptance. It might mean, in effect, that they are wrong about themselves. It is destabilising to discover that one is not what one supposed is destabilising, and growth, in this respect, feels both crazy and weird.

Billie's reflection: Maintaining stability within the team requires a sense of safety. It requires an open and honest dialogue with all parts. It requires a therapist who understands what you can and cannot tolerate at any given time. Like driving a car, you must know how and when to apply the brakes. It threatens our system to discover

that the lurkers may not be all they seem. My instinct is to accelerate through it, to propel through the process and reach a resolution. As important as it is for me, to accept these parts and what they have experienced, it is crucial to be patient and allow the process to flow naturally.

The therapeutic relationship with Nicola allows me to address my fears and anxieties. We can work together to tackle any therapeutic challenges as they occur. It is a slow and painful process. The knowledge that there is someone by your side, that you can trust and that can hear your truths and hold your feelings, provides me with the courage to explore this tentative change in the lurkers and their way of being.

8 | SESSION 3

In this session, some weeks later, Billie and her team have become much more interested in making contact with the 'lurkers'. Kip, in particular, is excitedly hoping to make friends with them. He has drawn a picture of them, and they look like a cheerful group of upturned faces, about 10 in number: all children, some quite small. And yet, it is still both scary for Billie to imagine connecting with them, and difficult to envisage. How to do it? Billie is having to invent a brand new approach to move towards these very isolated parts. Billie and I are here engaged in meta-communication about this process (see Table 4). We wonder what we have noticed in the behaviour of the 'lurkers' that might help give us a sense of their purpose in the team?

8.1 | Discussion—dialogue not consensus is the goal

Nicola's reflection: In this exchange, Ori is articulating a revolutionary position. The 'lurkers', until now, have held and expressed the introjected view that Billie is less than human, freakish, pathetic. They use this to explain her abuse, and to punish her when she breaks the internalised rules of her childhood. But Ori recognises that Billie (and all their parts) are human. His appreciation of the theory of human development leads him to this undeniable view. It is expressed with the calm assurance of truth. Here, we can see ambivalence resolving. The increasing contact with the 'lurkers' seems to reinforce Ori's counter-position, which is to affirm their humanity. Authenticity requires that Billie accept each part as inherently valuable, human beings. This, to the eminently reasonable Ori, is logically self-evident. The crossroad junction is here resolved. It is no longer possible to hold the 'lurkers' outside the system, because of their undeniable humanity, which demands recognition from Billie.

It is important to recognise that this realisation has not developed from consensus, but from engagement with the deeper ambivalence allowed and experienced by Billie and her lurkers. Inclusion does not mean integration, which implies that two positions are subsumed within one view. Inclusion values all voices, encouraging the expression of multiple positions and multiple identity.

Billie's reflection: 'As long as you keep secrets and suppress information, you are fundamentally at war with yourself' (Van der Kolk, 2015, p. 232). Ori's contribution in this session enabled me to reflect on how my own history and experiences had distorted my view of the 'lurkers'. Being split off from them, and the feelings and memories they hold, only serves to maintain inner conflict. In accepting their humanity and allowing a dialogue to take place that welcomes everyone's voices and opinions a shift from inner conflict to inner community becomes a possibility.

Ori's insistence on the 'lurkers' humanity challenges me to accept these parts, which I have held outside the team. By welcoming their voices and opinions, and learning to accept and nurture them, I can begin to repair the relational trauma and reconnect with all parts of myself, others and the world (De Young, 2015; Van der Kolk, 2015). The therapeutic relationship that is enjoyed by myself and Nicola has helped to repair some of these relational traumas and often acts as an example of the collaborative process, which enables parts of the team to learn new ways of being.

TABLE 4 Transcript—Excerpt 3

Transcript	Commentary
<p>B: <i>What happens if ... their job really fits in with the team and is, really useful? I don't think ... no that feels like we're going to jinx it.</i></p>	<p>I worry that if I say things out loud or dare to believe what I am thinking, it will vanish into thin air. I remember previous times when this has happened.</p>
<p>N: <i>Okay. I am thinking that whatever their job is, they've already been trying to do it. But they've been trying to do it in the way they knew before. And now it feels like they're not trying to do it that way, at the moment..?</i></p>	<p>Sometimes, where there is trauma, speaking things aloud is felt as a threat. I summarise what we have been observing, and remove the pressure that Billie must articulate what she is thinking.</p> <p>I recall that many of Billie's parts had already had a job, which evolved or deepened, somehow.</p> <p>This reminds me of the relationship I initially had with Rebel. In attempting to ignore and disown her, her destructive tendencies turned inwards and became more powerful. Once I accepted her unconditionally, she became an ally who helps to identify and alert me to potential danger or disruption to the system.</p>
<p>B: <i>If you think about the real world. If you have a group of people, let's call them extremists. If you have a group of extremists and you keep them locked away and separate from others and treat them negatively. Then they're just going to get more extreme, aren't they?</i></p>	
<p>N: <i>Mmm-hm</i></p>	
<p>B: <i>Or the chances are they'll be more extreme.</i></p>	
<p>N: <i>Yes.</i></p>	
<p>B: <i>If you ... they're not going to learn anything there. That's what our head tells us. They've been out there all along and they've not learnt anything, they just use the old rule book.</i></p>	
<p><i>How they going to know that we can have a new rule book if they're not involved with it? How are they going to own it?</i></p>	
<p><i>It's like if you tell a client how to do something and you direct them too much ... mmm ... they don't own it: it's not going to work in the long term, is it? They have to own it and find their own way of doing it. They have to be involved with the process. So, isn't it the same, kind of? Do you think?</i></p>	
<p>N: <i>I agree totally.</i></p>	<p>Billie is establishing a methodology for working with these 'extreme parts'. I feel viscerally the power of this method.</p>
<p>B: <i>(silence)</i> [Ori: You do not get to pick and choose what parts or feelings you want to re-connect with ... you get the good, the bad and the ugly.]</p>	<p>Ori is very clear at this point and demands my attention.</p>
<p>N: <i>Who was that?</i></p>	<p>I noticed here that B seemed to be reacting to words I could not hear. She paused, listened, then nodded. I want in on the conversation!</p>
<p>B: <i>Ori's talking</i></p>	

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Transcript	Commentary
N: <i>What does he say?</i>	
B: <i>Authenticity</i>	
N: <i>Authenticity</i>	
B: <i>Yes</i>	
N: <i>... very important</i>	I want to hear more, and not to get in the way of this processing. Authenticity is very important to therapists generally, but also to people who have been othered by social stigma, and to people who have been abused, and forced to live a lie. Authenticity is a strong value for Billie. I just nod towards this in my response.
B: <i>Yep. Yeah, back to that. Back to ... if you can't accept all parts of ourselves, then you can't have proper relationships, authentic relationships. And, that's what we strive for as human beings ...</i>	Ori's words quieten everyone in the system. His words silence me, and that sense of what it means to be human, freeze frames everything around me for a split second.
<i>And we are a human being.</i>	
N: <i>Oh my god ... that was beautiful.</i>	The hairs on my arms and my neck stood up at this point. I felt Ori's certainty and his authority.
B: <i>Huh. He's been looking at a lot of books.</i>	
N: <i>Mmm.</i>	
[Ori: Connecting with yourself and others is a step in the right direction. It will challenge you and at times you will falter, but every time you resist the urge to hide away another piece of the jigsaw finds its place.]	Ori's words sting ... I can feel tears behind my eyes but fight them.
B: <i>It's worth the risk. He always says that. If you don't risk ... the potential benefit will not be realised if you don't take the risk to be attached to people.</i>	
N: <i>Yes. But if you don't ... you're guaranteed the loss.</i>	Connection might lead to loss, but isolation always will. I am made aware of some of the profound lost connections Billie has experienced, and those connections which continue.
B: <i>Yeh.</i>	I immediately see a back catalogue of images of previous connections. Times I have taken that risk and it has resulted in pain. I feel the pain deep in my chest. I also remember the warmth and love of those relationships. I have to remind myself that my resilience has increased and I will be okay. I continue to fight the tears.

9 | IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Nicola: This case study has illustrated our developing and idiographic model of working with plural identity. While we recognise that dissociation is a real and adaptive response to trauma, we do not recognise that all persons experiencing plural identities are disordered. We propose that the experience of multiple self-identities is a legitimate expression of being human. In working with plural identity, we offer the following suggestions for therapists, counsellors and clients.

1. Develop empathy towards all parts of self, listening to the background voices and placing yourselves in their unique frame of reference. Experience is constructed by multiple, valid positions. It is not necessary to argue with these views, or to side with them. In sitting with the complexity of multiple wisdoms, therapists may find that they are spontaneously highly attuned to the parts of self being kept in the background. You may experience surprising accuracy in perceiving the images, words and feelings of these parts. This supports the prizing of each part as a valid expression of the self.
2. As well as upholding the validity of all individual parts of self, I recommend that therapists and clients honour the inner system and its ecology. Change is disruptive, and can threaten a way of being that has evolved to protect us from pain. Patience and acceptance are the hallmarks of this work. Process happens almost by itself, as the relative positions are articulated. We do not need to hurry, resolve or force this natural dialogue.
3. Because parts of self are not pressured to 'integrate' or to 'agree', because each is valued, and each is heard within a system that is honoured, inclusion of parts can be promoted and can become an asset in the therapeutic work, and in daily life. The aim of inclusion is not consensus or compromise, or the absorption of parts into a homogenous whole, but instead to develop a mutual appreciation and warmth, as different perspectives are held and welcomed. This unconditional acceptance of parts may lead to an eventual resolution of ambivalence, or it may allow that ambivalence to be accepted and honoured. Where difference is allowed and prized, inclusion follows.

Billie: My experience of personal therapy has left me feeling stronger. I have gained a greater understanding of my experience of dissociation and grown in self-awareness. It has been, and continues to be, a journey that has seen me undergo a metamorphosis. The parts that have emerged and grown during this process have brought to the fore my therapist self that is informing my practice.

I have discovered that my experience of dissociation is important. I have learnt to accept that the tacit knowledge I possess informs my practice as a therapist. I have a voice. Although I remain upfront and manage the team, I am grateful for the presence of my 'parts' and value their input.

There have been many challenges along the way. The reality of revealing myself to others, especially my peers, continues to fill me with fear and anxiety and I am reminded of some words I received as a student, warning me of the potential impact of writing about my own dissociation on past, present and future clients. I have also come to accept that while some readers will find no value in my experiences, others may be open to recognising the journey I have been and continue to go through and what I have discovered along the way.

My hope is that this article goes some way towards illustrating the lived experience of dissociation: that it helps to explain the inexplicable and describe the indescribable; that it raises awareness of dissociation and encourages a dialogue. Everyone's experience is unique, and this is my lived experience. I have become the person I was meant to be with all its complexities and I look forward to what the future may bring.

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