

Can Foucault's Panopticism Drive Dissociative Personality Disorder? An Implied Possibility

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ABSTRACT

Michel Foucault's exploration of panopticism in *Discipline and Punish*, drawing from Jeremy Bentham's panopticon concept, reveals a complex array of implications. Unlike Bentham's centralized surveillance paradigm, Foucault proposes a decentralized approach wherein individuals internalize surveillance, becoming subjects under constant panoptical observation. This decentralization arises from the impracticality of centrally monitoring the expansive human populace. Panoptical governance hinges on fostering perpetual awareness of scrutiny, promoting adherence to societal norms through self-imposed surveillance frameworks. However, repercussions of societal repression within a panoptical framework, where conformity may suppress individual desires, pose individual psychological challenges. Sigmund Freud's theory of repression, contextualized within panopticism, highlights potential outcomes like frustration and discontent. This notion corroborated by a psychoanalytical reading of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, illustrates how repression engenders cognitive dissonance and lead to emergence of alter-egos as coping mechanisms. Leon Festinger's concept of *cognitive dissonance* further elucidates the psychological tension stemming from conflicting beliefs or actions. This perspective suggests that unaddressed cognitive dissonance, under panoptic glare, may culminate in Dissociative Personality Disorder (DPD), where alter-egos are created to mitigate perceived transgressive desires, serving as coping mechanisms against the guilt induced by panoptical surveillance at the individual level.

Keywords: Panopticism, Cognitive Dissonance, Dissociative Personality Disorder, Alter-Ego

1. Social Importance of Panopticism

Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975), used Jeremy Bentham's (1789) concept of 'panopticon', derived from the Greek word 'panoptes' implying 'all seeing', as metaphor for disciplinary society. According to Foucault, just as a panopticon works on the concept of using visibility as a trap, society too induces a sense of permanent visibility to ensure its smooth functioning. The term 'panopticism' coined by Foucault (1975) breaks in spirit with the concept of Bentham's 'panopticon' in the sense that the latter relies on the presence of a centralised system of vigilance whereas, the former decentralizes vigilance.

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According to Foucault (1975), the basic idea of panoptical control stems from the fact that people are expected to exhibit obedience to prevailing societal norms and rules when they are conscious of the fact that they are being watched. Bentham's model of the Panopticon was based on an architecturally and managerially innovative model prison which he conceptualized. However, the quantitative vastness of the basic units of society—namely human beings – in itself implies the largely probable futility of a centralized system of vigilance being able to exert a cautious watch over the units.

The prospective futility of a system of centralised surveillance over society leads to the need for a decentralised system where basic units work as surveillance units with respect to their individual behaviour as well as those of others. Therein, the concept of Foucault's 'panopticism' (1975) finds realistic adaptation via conditioning the minds of individuals to internalize surveillance. By this, each individual is conditioned to serve as decentralized panoptical units in the social panopticon chiefly by keeping a close vigil on their own activities, and thus, rendering omnipotence and omniscience to the framework of established societal norms and moral codes of conduct.

2. Repression due to Panoptical Surveillance-- The birth factor of Mitigation:

The term society, if taken beyond face value, does not merely imply a group of people but a condition where the plethora of human emotions and complex human relationships find coexistence by being aware of the presence of others as well as common objectives and interests. Survival within the bounds of the aforementioned condition caters to the basic needs of man viz food, clothing and shelter of individuals in varying degrees but with some amount of ease which has gradually become tantamount to human existence.

However, getting conditioned to easy accessibility of basic needs comes with a price to pay at the expense of individual expression of desires. Man, allegedly a 'social being', cannot live beyond the realms of society and this, in turn, oft demands compliance to certain norms with unquestioning obedience as aptly demonstrated by Solomon Asch (1950) in his *conformity experiments*. As societal norms are often framed with an eye to abet harmonious existence of the majority, the possible overlooking of certain individual desires leads to generalization of the multitude of human emotions and desires, narrowing them down to a one-size-fits all dilemma.

Thus, befuddled in the horns of this dilemma in full view of decentralized panoptical surveillance, the possibility of the human mind getting conditioned to reading certain desires as transgressive or unworthy of harbouring arises. In such conditions, any desire deemed contrary to what is regarded as socially acceptable oft gets earmarked in the internal microcosm of an individual as a potential red flag. These desires, deemed contradictory to social well-being, are then repressed by the individual either willingly or unwillingly, the latter of which might potentially harbour consequences.

The term 'repression' as implied by Sigmund Freud (*The Interpretation of Dreams, 1900*) symbolized the mental 'mechanism' which turn unacceptable desires away from individuals. When viewed in light of Foucault's panopticism, this 'mechanism' may find justification as a reaction of the human mind to deemed transgressive desires viewed through the lens of his inherent decentralised panoptical unit.

Repression, though regarded a defence mechanism, comes with its own cons. It may potentially curb individual expression, rendering a person frustrated and dissatisfied. The

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stemming dissatisfaction could potentially seek pacification by resorting to mitigatory means as suggestively demonstrated in the novel *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson.

3. Mr Hyde—a Product of Cognitive Dissonance and an Epitome of Transgression:

In the aforementioned novel, Edward Hyde, the experimentally procured alter-ego of Dr Henry Jekyll, is crafted in order to give vent to his pent-up desires which he allegedly considers hedonistic and contrary to the spirit of the Christian ideologies upheld in his contemporary society at large.

“At that time, my virtue slumbered; my evil, kept awake by ambition, was alert and swift to seize the occasion; and the thing that was projected was Edward Hyde.” (*Robert Loie Stevenson, The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, 1886*)

The above quote by Dr Jekyll brings out the plight of a human being shorn in a tug-of-war between his socially ingrained values on one side and his innate desires on the other. The quote also provides an insight into the cognitive dissonance experienced by the human mind when a slip may prioritise his desires over rationality.

While guilt and shame are two of the leashes with which panopticism exerts control over the mind of an individual, their modus operandi is different. Maria Miceli et al (2018) describes Guilt as being concerned with one's sense of responsibility for a harmful attitude or behaviour, whereas, shame as implying a 'nonmoral' negative self-evaluation (*Reconsidering the Differences Between Shame and Guilt, European Journal of Psychology 14(3), 2018*). The aforementioned article also clarifies the term 'nonmoral' as being somewhat devoid of responsibility issues. Going by this explanation, it may be apparent that the key difference between guilt and shame banks on the point of responsibility where the former bears an essence of personal responsibility whereas the latter may not necessarily do so.

Leon Festinger (1957) coined the term *cognitive dissonance*, implying the psychological tension in the mind of individuals owing to inconsistency in beliefs or behaviour. According to Festinger's theory, people, in a bid to reduce the dissonance or add consonant elements to restore consonance, often make a few changes with respect to their deemed inconsistent elements (*Leon Festinger, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, 1957*)—something akin to seeking a mitigatory pathway. However, cognitive dissonance may potentially harbingers a serious problem if unaddressed, bringing angst and impaired decision-making in its wake. This angst may very well be regarded as a sense of guilt stemming as a result of holding oneself accountable for the onus for cognitive dissonance when viewed through the lens of the given individual's panoptical surveillance.

4. Relationship between Cognitive Dissonance and Dissociative Personality Disorder:

As cognitive dissonance may allegedly pose the potential to express itself in the mind through feelings of guilt, the onus for harbouring the dissonance is assigned more to the self than society at large by an individual's panopticism. Owing to this, individuals may often find themselves locked in an internal battle as they try to suppress thoughts and desires deemed transgressive and adhere to behaviour deemed normal by society. This battle however may prove traumatic to individuals who wish to dissociate further with the onus associated with these uncomfortable thoughts, resulting in the process of birthing oft-multiple 'alters' with alternate personalities.

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Dissociative Personality Disorder (DPD), also known as Split Personality, manifests itself in the formation of one or more alter-egos (also termed 'alters') which reside parallel to their primary or host identity which is deemed "generally more passive" (*Split personality disorder: Signs, symptoms, causes, diagnosis, and more, Jon Johnson, Medical News Today, 2023*). This may very well serve as a coping mechanism targeting two ends:

- Shifting guilt induced by panoptical surveillance from their primary identity.
- Mitigation of desires deemed transgressive through the lens of accepted social morality.

However, these 'alters' may often possess all facets associated with a personality such as name, age, gender, moods, memories, vocabularies as well as sexual orientation (Johnson, 2023) with which the primary identity of an individual may find some degree of identification but is unable to express in full view of his/her panoptical surveillance as expressed in Stevenson's description of Edward Hyde. In *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Edward Hyde, the experimentally procured alter-ego of Dr Jekyll is described through expressions like 'creature', 'monkey', 'ape-like' 'deformity' and 'wasn't like a man'; a stark contrast to the terms used to describe Dr Jekyll like 'smooth-faced' and 'charitable'. The difference stands out starkly in the sense that Hyde is described, on the physical as well as mental levels, as a man on an atavistic reversal bordering on bestiality whereas Jekyll is the very embodiment of a socially reputable gentleman.

The mitigatory pathways opened up by having dissociative personalities, may potentially provide an individual with some amount of mental comfort as their primary identities appear devoid of the onus of guilt as deemed by the individual. However, the dangers posed by these mitigations may very well border on transgression as may be hypothesised in light of the crimes committed by Edward Hyde against two innocent citizens in the novel. Though the 'desires' harboured by Jekyll leading him to embark on a mitigatory quest are not vividly described in the novel, going by the way Stevenson pours vials of scorn on Hyde, it may surely be stated that he considered unveiled expression of these 'desires' to be unworthy of social human beings—suggestively akin to transgression with a touch of hedonism. Thus, in light of the aforementioned facts, it may be justified that individual desires contrary to the moral framework supporting society might also prove to be anti-social, justifying the utility of panopticism.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the concept of panopticism, as elucidated by Michel Foucault, presents a compelling framework for understanding the development of Dissociative Personality Disorder (DPD). Panopticism, rooted in the idea of pervasive surveillance and internalized discipline, creates a societal environment where individuals are constantly aware of being watched and judged, leading to repression of desires deemed contrary to social norms. This repression, fueled by the fear of guilt and shame, can result in cognitive dissonance—a psychological tension arising from conflicting beliefs or behaviors.

As individuals grapple with cognitive dissonance and the pressure to conform, they may seek mitigatory pathways to alleviate their internal conflict. One such pathway is the formation of alternate personalities or "alters" in DPD. These alters serve as a coping mechanism, allowing individuals to shift guilt away from their primary identity and mitigate desires considered transgressive by society.

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However, while procured dissociative personalities or alters may offer temporary relief from internal turmoil, they also pose risks of transgressive behavior and antisocial actions, as exemplified by the character of Edward Hyde in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Hyde's actions, driven by repressed desires and a dissociated identity, underscore the potential dangers inherent in unchecked cognitive dissonance and panoptical surveillance.

In essence, the relationship between panopticism, cognitive dissonance and Dissociative Personality Disorder highlights the intricate interplay between societal norms, individual psychology, and mental health. Through an understanding of how panoptical surveillance influences the repression of desires and the formation of dissociative identities, insights into the complex mechanisms underlying psychological disorders and the broader impact of social control mechanisms on human behavior and identity may potentially be obtained.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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