

# Is dissociative amnesia a culture-bound syndrome? Findings from a survey of historical literature

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## ABSTRACT

**Background.** Natural human psychological phenomena, such as depression, anxiety, delusions, hallucinations and dementia, are documented across the ages in both fictional and non-fictional works. We asked whether ‘dissociative amnesia’ was similarly documented throughout history.

**Method.** We advertised in three languages on more than 30 Internet web sites and discussion groups, and also in print, offering US\$1000 to the first individual who could find a case of dissociative amnesia for a traumatic event in any fictional or non-fictional work before 1800.

**Results.** Our search generated more than 100 replies; it produced numerous examples of ordinary forgetfulness, infantile amnesia and biological amnesia throughout works in English, other European languages, Latin, Greek, Arabic, Sanskrit and Chinese before 1800, but no descriptions of individuals showing dissociative amnesia for a traumatic event.

**Conclusions.** If dissociative amnesia for traumatic events were a natural psychological phenomenon, an innate capacity of the brain, then throughout the millennia before 1800, individuals would presumably have witnessed such cases and portrayed them in non-fictional works or in fictional characters. The absence of cases before 1800 cannot reasonably be explained by arguing that our ancestors understood or described psychological phenomena so differently as to make them unrecognizable to modern readers because spontaneous complete amnesia for a major traumatic event, in an otherwise lucid individual, is so graphic that it would be recognizable even through a dense veil of cultural interpretation. Therefore, it appears that dissociative amnesia is not a natural neuropsychological phenomenon, but instead a culture-bound syndrome, dating from the nineteenth century.

## INTRODUCTION

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR; APA, 2000)* defines ‘dissociative amnesia’ as ‘an inability to recall important personal information, usually of a traumatic or stressful nature, that is too extensive to be explained by normal forgetfulness’ (p. 520). By contrast, only 30 pages earlier, DSM-IV-TR seems to characterize dissociative

amnesia very differently: it mentions ‘dissociative symptoms such as amnesia’ in a list of ‘pseudoneurological’ symptoms, along with such conversion symptoms as impaired coordination or balance, paralysis, or seizures (p. 490). Which of these characterizations is correct? Is dissociative amnesia a natural neuropsychological phenomenon, an innate capacity of the brain to expel traumatic memories from consciousness, or is it merely a pseudoneurological symptom, analogous to pseudo-seizures, pseudo-paralysis or anesthesia in a non-anatomic distribution?

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This question remains controversial. Some writers maintain that dissociative amnesia is a natural human response to traumatic events, such as combat, crimes, natural disasters, rape and childhood abuse (Van der Kolk, 1994; Freyd, 1996; Brown *et al.* 1999). By contrast, others have questioned the validity of dissociative amnesia (Pope *et al.* 1998), and have even characterized it as ‘a piece of psychiatric folklore devoid of convincing empirical support’ (McNally, 2003, p. 275). Notably, scientific publications regarding dissociative amnesia rose to a sharp peak in the mid-1990s, but have since declined steeply, while continuing to contest its validity (Pope *et al.* 2006).

In an initial survey (Pope, 1997) of fictional and non-fictional works prior to 1800, we could not find any cases of dissociative amnesia. One of the first that we could identify was Dr Manette, in Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* (Dickens, 1859), who displays amnesia for much of the trauma of his incarceration in the Bastille. Emily Dickinson (1862) also speculates that a traumatic event might breed amnesia because it is too painful to remember:

There is a pain – so utter  
It swallows substance up  
Then covers the Abyss with Trance  
So Memory can step  
Around – across – upon it  
As one within a Swoon  
Goes safely – where an open eye  
Would drop Him – Bone by Bone.

Another nineteenth-century case of dissociative amnesia, with subsequent ‘recovery’ of the memory, appears in Rudyard Kipling’s novel, *Captains Courageous* (Kipling, 1896). Penn, a Pennsylvania preacher, loses his family in a tragic flood; he develops amnesia for this trauma, as well as for his prior profession, and goes to work as a simple fisherman on a Grand Banks schooner. One day, after a collision between an ocean liner and another schooner at sea, Penn suddenly recovers his lost memory of the flood and the death of his family, and recounts his story to other members of the crew. Similar cases are common in twentieth-century fiction: in novels (Smiley, 1991; Deaver, 2002), plays (Pirandello, 1931) and numerous Hollywood screenplays (*Batman Forever*, *Young Sherlock Holmes*, *The Butterfly Effect*, *Prince of Tides*,

*The Bad Seed*, and many others; see [www.imdb.com/keyword/repressed-memory/](http://www.imdb.com/keyword/repressed-memory/)).

We were surprised that dissociative amnesia appeared so commonly in modern works but seemed absent prior to 1800. Natural human psychological phenomena, such as delusions, hallucinations, depression, anxiety and dementia, appear in written works throughout the ages – in the Bible, in Greek tragedy, in Shakespeare, and in the literature of other cultures around the world. Therefore, we reasoned that if dissociative amnesia were also a natural phenomenon, an innate capacity of the brain, then it, too, should appear in written works throughout history. In other words, our ancestors would inevitably have witnessed dissociative amnesia for traumatic events in themselves or others, and then portrayed this phenomenon in non-fictional works or in fictional characters. Accordingly, we initiated a greatly expanded search, using Internet and print advertising, for cases of dissociative amnesia appearing in any written work prior to 1800.

## METHOD

After first remarking that dissociative amnesia seemed absent from written works prior to 1800 (Pope, 1997), we continued to query literary and classical scholars to see whether they could produce a case, but continued to find none. By 2006, the maturation of the Internet allowed us to expand our search in a manner never previously possible, by posting our query where thousands of scholars could see it. Specifically, we placed a notice offering a US\$1000 award to the first person who could produce an example of dissociative amnesia for a traumatic event, in any work of fiction or non-fiction, in any language, prior to 1800 (see full text at [www.biopsychlab.com](http://www.biopsychlab.com)). For our notice, we used the term ‘repressed memory’, a term essentially synonymous with dissociative amnesia (Pope, 1997) and probably more recognizable to lay readers. We took care to indicate that ‘repressed memory’, like ‘dissociative amnesia’, represented the inability to recall a traumatic event, as opposed to ordinary forgetfulness for an event, or merely trying not to think about the event. We posted our notice on numerous Internet web sites and discussion groups (Table 1), and placed a similar display advertisement in the

Table 1. *Internet sites and news groups posting our advertisement seeking cases of ‘repressed memory’ in fiction or non-fiction prior to 1800*

Website	Root address	Date posted	Number of days online <sup>a</sup>
Google Answers	<a href="http://www.answers.google.com/answers/">http://www.answers.google.com/answers/</a>	9 Feb. 2006	181
Butterflies and Wheels	<a href="http://www.butterfliesandwheels.com/">http://www.butterfliesandwheels.com/</a>	27 Feb. 2006	163
Clayton Cramer	<a href="http://www.claytoncramer.com">http://www.claytoncramer.com</a>	28 Feb. 2006	162
Political Theory Daily Review	<a href="http://www.politicaltheory.info/">http://www.politicaltheory.info/</a>	1 Mar. 2006	9
MetaFilter	<a href="http://www.metafilter.com/tags/money">http://www.metafilter.com/tags/money</a>	1 Mar. 2006	161
KristenMortensen.com	<a href="http://kirstenmortensen.com/">http://kirstenmortensen.com/</a>	1 Mar. 2006	161
Technorati	<a href="http://technorati.com/">http://technorati.com/</a>	2 Mar. 2006	160
mail archive	<a href="http://mail-archive.com">mail-archive.com</a>	7 Mar. 2006	155
Great Books Forums	<a href="http://jollyroger.com/greatbooksforums">http://jollyroger.com/greatbooksforums</a>	14 Mar. 2006	148
Literature Forums	<a href="http://www.literatureforums.net/">http://www.literatureforums.net/</a>	14 Mar. 2006	80
Islamicity Forums	<a href="http://www.islamicity.com/">http://www.islamicity.com/</a>	14 Mar. 2006	148
Bible.org	<a href="http://www.bible.org/">http://www.bible.org/</a>	14 Mar. 2006	1
All Empires	<a href="http://www.allempires.com/">http://www.allempires.com/</a>	14 Mar. 2006	148
Biological Psychiatry Lab	<a href="http://www.biopsychlab.com">http://www.biopsychlab.com</a>	16 Mar. 2006	146
Marginal Revolution	<a href="http://www.marginalrevolution.com/">http://www.marginalrevolution.com/</a>	17 Mar. 2006	145
AntiEleia (Spanish)	<a href="http://antieleia.blogspot.com">http://antieleia.blogspot.com</a>	17 Mar. 2006	145
Positive Liberty	<a href="http://www.positiveliberty.com/index.php">http://www.positiveliberty.com/index.php</a>	22 Mar. 2006	140
History News Network	<a href="http://hnn.us/">http://hnn.us/</a>	23 Mar. 2006	139
Culturelles.net	<a href="http://www.culturelles.net/">http://www.culturelles.net/</a>	27 Mar. 2006	135
Google Groups	<a href="http://groups.google.com">groups.google.com</a>	27 Mar. 2006	135
Psycho-Babble Psychology	<a href="http://www.dr-bob.org/babble/psycho/">http://www.dr-bob.org/babble/psycho/</a>	5 Apr. 2006	126
RMT in Australia	<a href="http://recoveredmemorytherapy.blogspot.com/">http://recoveredmemorytherapy.blogspot.com/</a>	6 Apr. 2006	125
MSN Groups (French)	<a href="http://groups.msn.com">http://groups.msn.com</a>	17 Apr. 2006	114
Ecranlarge (French)	<a href="http://www.ecranlarge.com/entree_pub.php">http://www.ecranlarge.com/entree_pub.php</a>	17 Apr. 2006	114
Discutons.org (French)	<a href="http://www.discutons.org/">http://www.discutons.org/</a>	17 Apr. 2006	114
The Survivors Forum	<a href="http://www.eyecatchers.com/wbbs/WBB.cgi">http://www.eyecatchers.com/wbbs/WBB.cgi</a>	18 Apr. 2006	1
Skeptical Friends Network	<a href="http://www.skepticalfriends.org">http://www.skepticalfriends.org</a>	18 Apr. 2006	113
LituraturSchock (German)	<a href="http://literaturschock.de/">http://literaturschock.de/</a>	20 Apr. 2006	111
Versalia (German)	<a href="http://versalia.de/">http://versalia.de/</a>	20 Apr. 2006	111
False Memory Syndrome Foundation	<a href="http://www.fmsonline.org">http://www.fmsonline.org</a>	1 May 2006	100
Boston Globe Online	<a href="http://www.boston.com">http://www.boston.com</a>	12 June 2006	58
FURL	<a href="http://www.furl.net">http://www.furl.net</a>	17 June 2006	53

<sup>a</sup> Represents number of days online as of 9 August 2006.

*Chronicle of Higher Education* (31 March 2006, p. A52), a publication with 83 000 paid subscribers (see <http://chronicle.com/about-help.dir/adv/disadinfo.htm>). We also posed our question on ‘Google Answers’, a service where hundreds of experts, many with sophisticated Internet searching skills, will attempt to answer any question (see full text and responses at: <http://answers.google.com/answers/threadview?id=443814>), although we were limited by Google’s policy to a US\$200 maximum award in this instance. We also translated our advertisement into French and German (full texts available at [www.biopsychlab.com](http://www.biopsychlab.com)) and placed it on French and German web sites, again offering US\$1000 to the first person who could provide a case meeting our criteria. Although we performed more than 20 of the postings ourselves, our notice spawned discussion threads on numerous other web sites as well; some of these

are shown in Table 1, but there are probably others of which we are unaware. Finally, we subscribed to ‘The Memory Debate’, a private email group specifically focused on trauma and memory, and placed our notice there as well (see [www.tmdarchives.com](http://www.tmdarchives.com)).

## RESULTS

Our advertisement generated more than 100 responses, some several pages long, citing scores of texts prior to 1800, but none describing an individual showing spontaneous amnesia for a specific traumatic event. Instead, the cases involved ordinary forgetfulness (for example the often-forgetful Hotspur, in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part I*; Shakespeare, c. 1597), infantile amnesia (Oedipus, in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, abandoned as an infant by his mother, has no memory of her when he later marries her as

an adult; Sophocles, c. 430 BC), or amnesia due to biological causes [for example descriptions of amnesia following head injury, dating back at least to Pliny the Elder in AD 77 (Plinius Secundus, AD 77), if not to the ‘Ebers’ papyrus in 2500 BC (see Smith, online)]. Also excluded under the rubric of biological amnesia were cases of simple delirium; for example Heracles, in Euripides’ play of the same name (Euripides, c. 421–416 BC), is driven mad by Lyssa, murders his wife and children, then falls into a sleep after Athena hurls a boulder against him and he strikes his back against a pillar. He awakens, still somewhat delirious, with no memory of this entire episode. Other examples of delirium include Sophocles’ Ajax, driven mad by Athena, who slays cattle believing that he is killing the Argive leaders (Sophocles, c. 450 BC); the Arthurian knight Ivain (Iwein, in German), who goes mad after realizing that he has violated his pledge to return to his wife within one year (DeTroyes, 12th cent. AD; von Aue, 12th cent. AD; J. Scott, personal communication, June 2006); or Shakespeare’s King Lear, who initially does not recognize his own daughter when he awakens disoriented in the French Camp (Shakespeare, 1605). None of these cases represents an otherwise lucid individual who develops amnesia for a specific traumatic event.

Yet another biological cause of amnesia, frequently witnessed (though not diagnosed) by our ancestors, is epilepsy. Partial seizures, particularly those of temporal lobe origin, may cause individuals to display personality changes without loss of consciousness, followed by amnesia. In so-called non-convulsive status epilepticus, such episodes may persist for days or weeks (Walker *et al.* 2005). Many historical accounts, possibly extending back even to the biblical prophet Ezekiel (Altschuler, 2002), have described individuals with symptoms suggestive of partial seizures. Such historical cases are readily distinguishable from dissociative amnesia, however, in that individuals with epilepsy exhibit amnesia for random time periods, rather than amnesia for a specific traumatic event.

We also found many cases where individuals developed amnesia for whole blocks of information, including happy experiences, supernatural abilities, or their entire identities, but not for a specific traumatic event. Examples are Sigurd’s amnesia of his love for Brynhild in the

Norse *Volsunga Saga* (Anonymous, c. AD 1200); the immortal monkey Hanuman’s amnesia for his supernatural powers in some versions of the *Ramayana* (Anonymous, 4th cent. BC); the amnesia of reincarnated souls for their past lives (e.g. the concept of anamnesis in Plato’s *Meno*; Plato, c. 380 BC); Gu Kuang’s reincarnated son’s recollection of his past life in Tang Dynasty mythology (Anonymous, c. 8th cent. AD); King Dushyanta’s amnesia of his love for Shakuntala as a result of a curse in the *Shakuntala* of the Sanskrit poet Kalidasa (Kalidasa, c. 4th cent. AD); references in the Qur’an to forgetfulness imposed by the Shaitan, the Islamic equivalent of Satan (The Qur’an); or the gift of forgetfulness given by God to Adam and Chava (Eve) upon leaving the Garden of Eden in the *Midrash* (see [http://simcha.ilovetorah.com/#\\_ftnref27](http://simcha.ilovetorah.com/#_ftnref27)). Again, none of these cases involves an individual who became unable to remember a specific traumatic event.

Our respondents also cited works expressing the wish that one could forget unpleasant events, or the suggestion that one should try to put such events out of one’s mind, but again none portraying an individual who actually developed amnesia for a traumatic event. For example, in *The Fall of Troy*, a fourth-century poem by Quintus Smyrnaeus, Menelaus counsels Helen to ‘No more remember past griefs: seal them up | Hid in thine heart. Let all be locked within | The dim dark mansion of forgetfulness. | What profits it to call ill deeds to mind?’ (Quintus Smyrnaeus, 4th cent. AD). Importantly, however, Helen never ‘represses’ the memory of her abduction to Troy (the ‘past grief’ in question), much as she might have wanted to. The wish to forget unhappy events is similarly suggested in the *Elegiac Sonnet* of Charlotte Smith (1788): ‘Can the soft lustre of the sleeping main, | Yon radiant heaven, or all creation’s charms, | Erase the written troubles of the brain, | Which Memory tortures, and which Guilt alarms?’ Again, however, Smith does not imply that the brain can in fact spontaneously erase its troubles.

Although our ancestors apparently never described dissociative amnesia for a traumatic event, they wrote extensively about ordinary forgetfulness or amnesia caused by biological processes. For example, Locke (1690), in his *Essay on Human Understanding*, describes

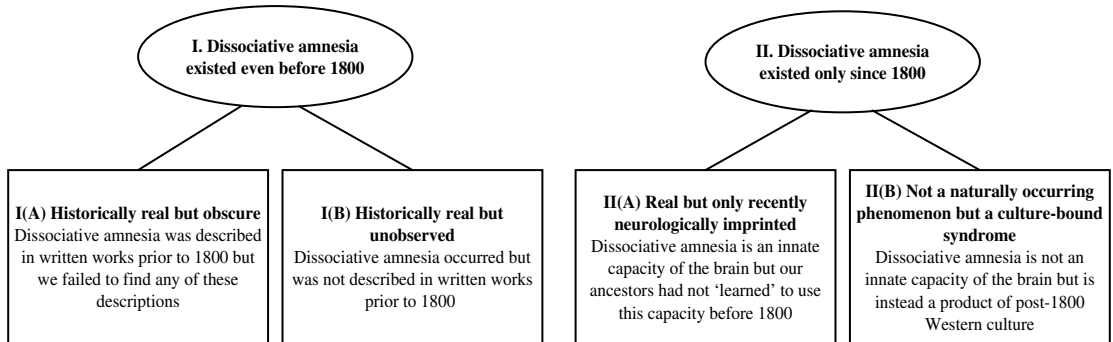


FIG. 1. Possible alternative hypotheses to explain our observations.

infantile amnesia, ordinary forgetfulness, amnesia associated with senile dementia, and global amnesia caused by brain diseases:

the constitution of the body does sometimes influence the memory, since we oftentimes find a disease quite strip the mind of all its ideas, and the flames of a fever in a few days calcine all those images to dust and confusion, which seemed to be as lasting as if graved in marble.

Nowhere in the extensive *Essay*, however, does Locke suggest that an otherwise lucid individual could spontaneously develop amnesia for a traumatic event.

Our respondents also located numerous eighteenth-century treatises and medical texts containing extensive discussions of memory (e.g. Rush, 1793; Brothers & Wright, 1795; Townsend, 1795–96; Walker, 1796; Crichton, 1798), but none describing a phenomenon even resembling ‘dissociative amnesia’. For example, Benjamin Rush, often considered the father of American psychiatry, discusses memory frequently throughout his works, including ‘the effects of physical causes upon the memory’ (Rush, 1793, p. 5), ordinary forgetfulness and reminiscence (pp. 304–305), and memory deficits attributable to dementia (p. 308), but nowhere suggests that individuals might be innately capable of expelling from consciousness the memory of a traumatic event.

## DISCUSSION

Natural human psychological phenomena, such as delusions, hallucinations, depression, anxiety and dementia, have been portrayed in countless

written works throughout the ages. Therefore, we reasoned that if ‘dissociative amnesia’ were also a natural psychological phenomenon, then it also should appear in written works throughout history. However, despite an extensive search using Internet and print advertising that reached thousands of readers, and despite offering a US\$1000 award, we were unable to find any description of dissociative amnesia in any written work, fictional or non-fictional, in any language, prior to 1800. These findings suggest that dissociative amnesia is not an innate capacity of the brain, but rather a product of modern Western culture.

There are four mutually exclusive and exhaustive hypotheses that might explain our findings (Fig. 1). The first hypothesis (‘historically real but obscure’) contends that dissociative amnesia has always existed, and has indeed been portrayed in written works prior to 1800, but that we simply missed all such references. This hypothesis can never be fully excluded, as it is almost impossible to ‘prove a negative’ such as the proposition above. It should be noted, however, that our study benefits from a powerful technology not feasible until the last few years, namely the ability to put a question before thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of individuals via the Internet. These individuals, in turn, had access to search capabilities far beyond those of a decade ago. For example, the Gale Eighteenth Century Collection Online ([www.gale.com/EighteenthCentury](http://www.gale.com/EighteenthCentury)) contains the full text of 150 000 eighteenth-century volumes, comprising over 30 000 000 pages, fully searchable on a word-by-word basis, using keywords in multiple languages.

Expert Internet librarians, such as those employed by 'Google Answers', could rapidly search dozens of databases such as this, using sophisticated search algorithms, to uncover any work that might mention any type of memory loss, and thus could locate even extremely rare items amid vast literatures. If dissociative amnesia were a natural human phenomenon, it should not be rare in the first place, and one should find numerous cases in world literature before 1800. Therefore, given our widespread advertising in three languages, offering a substantial monetary award, we find it implausible that every case of dissociative amnesia in every written work prior to 1800 could have escaped the attention of every person who saw our question – if such cases actually existed.

The second hypothesis ('historically real but unobserved') assumes that dissociative amnesia has always existed but was never explicitly portrayed in written works prior to 1800. This hypothesis seems even more implausible than the first, as fictional and non-fictional works throughout the ages have described human mental phenomena in detail. Why would dissociative amnesia not be included? If dissociative amnesia can afflict as many as 30% of trauma victims, as some reviews have suggested (Brown *et al.* 1999), then millions of people, throughout literate societies prior to 1800, would have experienced it. That no writer, anywhere, would have noticed a case, and described that case in any non-fictional work or any fictional character, strains credibility. Consider further that 'repressed' and 'recovered' memory is a powerful dramatic device, as attested by its ubiquitous appearance in twentieth-century literature and film. Then why would Shakespeare, or the Greek tragedians, or other writers, not have used this device frequently in their plots? The likely answer, again, is that our ancestors simply never witnessed dissociative amnesia.

A variant of the above hypothesis asserts that dissociative amnesia is indeed present in writings prior to 1800 but is difficult to recognize because our ancestors interpreted and described psychological phenomena differently from ourselves. For example, people in earlier centuries might have witnessed dissociative amnesia but portrayed it as demonic possession or some other supernatural event, or described it in

language entirely different from what we would use today. Certainly language and interpretation may vary, but dissociative amnesia is a graphic and striking phenomenon; if an otherwise lucid individual spontaneously develops complete amnesia for a serious traumatic event, such as being raped or witnessing the death of relations or friends, then a description of such a case would surely be recognizable, even through a dense veil of cultural interpretation. In other words, historical literature would include not just oblique religious or supernatural references to dissociative amnesia, or cases that merely showed certain features of it; one would also find clearly recognizable cases. Similarly, not only would modern commentaries be found that see hints or suggestions of dissociative amnesia in historical works but also clear-cut cases in the historical works themselves would be distinguished.

A similar argument begins with the observation that motor cars and subatomic particles were not described before 1800 because they had not been conceived. By analogy, the argument continues, individuals before 1800 had simply not conceived of dissociative amnesia because they did not conceive of memory in the manner that we do today. Indeed, as Young (1995) has shown, the boundaries of the concept of memory have greatly evolved in the last two centuries. Therefore, dissociative amnesia might have existed, yet gone unnoticed, in earlier times. But this argument is not plausible because one need not *conceive* of dissociative amnesia to *describe* it. As illustrated in the works cited above, our ancestors were certainly capable of describing traumatic events, and also capable of describing individuals with amnesia. Therefore, they would certainly have been capable of describing an individual who developed amnesia for a specific traumatic event if they saw such a case, even if they did not understand what they were seeing. In other words, whatever their cultural *concepts* of memory and trauma, their *descriptions* of amnesic individuals would still be identifiable. By analogy, writers before 1800 also had very different concepts of delusions and hallucinations, yet descriptions of these symptoms are nevertheless readily identifiable throughout texts prior to 1800. If dissociative amnesia existed, why would it not be identifiable in numerous texts as well?

In another similar argument by analogy, it might be noted that conditions such as autism or Parkinson's disease do not explicitly appear in works prior to 1800, yet these disorders have probably always existed. However, such disorders are not analogous to dissociative amnesia because they exhibit a whole range of non-specific symptoms, overlapping with many other syndromes. Thus historical references to these conditions would be buried amid generic descriptions of childhood anomalies or disorders of elderly individuals. By contrast, to reiterate, spontaneous complete amnesia for a major traumatic event, in an otherwise lucid individual, is a much more specific phenomenon, and thus would be readily recognizable in a work before 1800 if it did in fact occur.

In yet another variant of the 'historically real' hypotheses, it might be suggested that amnesia for non-traumatic events (e.g. King Dushyanta forgetting Shakuntala) really does represent dissociative amnesia, as DSM-IV-TR specifies only that dissociative amnesia usually, rather than invariably, involves traumatic or stressful information. But if we allow that these non-traumatic amnesias somehow represent 'atypical' dissociative amnesia, then why do we not find much larger numbers of ordinary, typical dissociative amnesia for specific traumatic events? Once again, if dissociative amnesia were a genuine natural phenomenon, one should easily find straightforward, recognizable cases of amnesia for trauma, and not have to stretch the definition.

The remaining two hypotheses in Fig. 1 postulate that dissociative amnesia existed only after 1800. The first of these hypotheses maintains that dissociative amnesia is a genuine, naturally occurring phenomenon, but simply did not afflict people until the last 200 years. For example, it might be argued by analogy that conditions such as bulimia nervosa were rarely, if ever, seen two centuries ago (Pope *et al.* 1985). However, bulimia nervosa is not a valid analogy because it represents a voluntary (albeit pathological) behavior, namely binge eating and 'purging', whereas dissociative amnesia is hypothesized to be an involuntary phenomenon that occurs spontaneously in the brain. Psychiatric disorders characterized by voluntary behaviors, such as compulsions, drug abuse or paraphilias, may vary widely in prevalence across

different cultures and different periods of history because voluntary behaviors are modulated by cultural influences. By contrast, phenomena caused by innate brain processes, such as psychosis, depression, anxiety or dementia, occur in all cultures across history (albeit with varying frequency, depending on biological and psychosocial modulators). Dissociative amnesia falls in this latter category. In other words, if the brain were inherently capable of spontaneously developing amnesia for a traumatic event, then the brains of individuals in classical Greece, or eighteenth-century England, or Tang Dynasty China, would possess the same capability as the brains of modern individuals.

A variant of this hypothesis asserts that modern individuals have somehow learned to exercise their innate ability to develop dissociative amnesia, whereas our ancestors did not learn this skill. But this argument also falters upon reflection. For example, it is widely maintained today that children develop dissociative amnesia for experiences of sexual abuse (Van der Kolk, 1994; Freyd, 1996; Brown *et al.* 1999), even though no one has 'taught' them how to do this. Therefore, children throughout the ages would also have been able to develop dissociative amnesia without prior teaching, and hence this phenomenon would have found its way into written works centuries earlier – unless our brains somehow metamorphosed after 1800.

Another variant of this hypothesis asserts that our ancestors were less vulnerable than ourselves to traumas such as sexual abuse or betrayal and hence did not develop dissociative amnesia. But this possibility clearly does not withstand inspection; it would be absurd to argue that modern individuals have a unique claim to a special brand of trauma that our predecessors never experienced.

Having excluded each of these first three hypotheses, we are left, by default, with the last hypothesis, namely that dissociative amnesia is not an innate, naturally occurring phenomenon but rather a product of modern Western culture. If so, why did this syndrome arise in our particular culture? Although a full response to this question extends beyond the limits of this paper, we know that nineteenth-century Europeans developed an evolving notion of the unconscious, arising against the cultural background of Romanticism (Ellenberger, 1970). This

*Weltanschauung* may very well have fostered the speculation that the mind could protect itself by relegating horrors to the unconscious – in Dickinson's phrase, like 'one within a swoon'. But unlike the swoon, another Victorian symptom that soon became obsolete, dissociative amnesia (or 'repressed memory') perhaps prospered because of its theoretical interest to writers such as Freud and Janet (see Young, 1995), its convenience as a dramatic device (especially with the advent of film; see Turim, 1989) and, more recently, its appeal to trauma theorists, both popular (Bass & Davis, 1988; Blume, 1990) and scientific (Herman, 1992; Young, 1995; Freyd, 1996). Like the diagnosis of fugue, which flourished briefly in the favorable cultural climate of the late nineteenth century (Hacking, 1998), dissociative amnesia may have survived in our culture because it has occupied a persistently fertile niche.

Given our findings, how should dissociative amnesia be classified? Using the language of DSM-IV-TR quoted earlier, it might best be grouped with other pseudoneurological symptoms, conditions that lack a recognizable medical or neurological basis, such as pseudo-seizures, pseudo-paralysis or pseudo-anesthesia. Pseudoneurological symptoms are a category of conversion symptoms, and conversion disorder, in turn, is a type of somatoform disorder. Indeed, classifying dissociative amnesia as a conversion disorder would bring future editions of the DSM into congruence with the existing *ICD-10 International Classification of Mental and Behavioral Disorders* (WHO, 1993), where dissociative disorders are classified as synonymous with conversion disorders, and where 'dissociative amnesia' is categorized together with 'trance and possession disorders', 'dissociative convulsions' and 'dissociative anaesthesia and sensory loss'.

In conclusion, dissociative amnesia may seem very real, and even commonplace, to contemporary clinicians and their patients, just as pseudo-paralysis was commonplace at the Salpêtrière of Charcot in the 1890s, or pseudo-seizures at the Salem witch trials in the 1690s. But each of these syndromes appears to have represented a cultural product of its time, rather than an actual neurological disorder in the brain. Viewed in this light, dissociative amnesia is best characterized as a 'culture-bound' form of

conversion disorder, a phenomenon peculiar to our modern Western culture.

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## DECLARATION OF INTEREST

None.

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