

The Case of Sybil in the Teaching of Psychology

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What do psychology professors today typically tell their students about the case of Sybil (F. R. Schreiber, 1973)—once considered the classic case of multiple personality disorder (MPD), until gradually revealed to be a fraud by new evidence (R. W. Rieber, 1998)? A 14-item survey was completed by a national sample of 125 college psychology teachers. It was found that a sizable minority of teachers discuss MPD (35%) or Sybil (23%) in their classes, 40% continue to regard Sybil as a classic case of MPD, and 83% report being only slightly or not at all familiar with new revelations about the Sybil case. Psychology teachers are offered 5 guidelines for accurately teaching about Sybil today.

KEY WORDS: Sybil; teaching psychology.

How do psychology professors today cover the case of Sybil, as an example of multiple personality disorder (MPD)? This question becomes an important example of the lag time between scientific findings and classroom exposition since new discoveries about the fraudulent nature of the infamous Sybil case emerged in 1998.

The unusual diagnosis of MPD was first limned by psychotherapist Morton Prince (1906). After the publication of journalist Flora Rheta Schreiber's best-selling book *Sybil* in 1973, the dramatic case of Sybil became widely recognized among psychologists and the general public as probably the single best known case epitomizing MPD, and likely increased the frequency of clinical diagnoses of MPD in past years. Meanwhile, a few psychologists voiced increasing doubts about the MPD diagnosis and the Sybil case, along with related issues like

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false/recovered memory, hypnosis, and childhood sexual abuse (Spanos, 1996). In 1997 psychologist Robert Rieber uncovered and analyzed some long-lost audiotapes of Sybil's actual sessions with her psychiatrist Cornelia Wilbur, originally deposited with him by author Schreiber in 1972. These tapes revealed conclusive evidence that "In the final analysis Sybil is a phony multiple personality case at best" (Rieber, 1999, p. 10)—replete with what therapists today recognize as covert suggestion and overt manipulation during the course of therapy. Rieber's initial presentation of the audiotapes at the August 1998 meetings of the American Psychological Association was met with immediate and strong interest by colleagues and the media, apparently as a welcome confirmation of the lingering doubts that have haunted the case (Ritter, 1998). Yet to the extent that textbooks define the "core knowledge" of psychology (Zeichmeister & Zeichmeister, 2000), a subsequent content analysis of 90 textbooks in introductory and abnormal psychology found that a large percentage of textbooks through the 1990s continued to tell our students about the drama of Sybil's multiple personalities with few qualifications or doubts about the case (Harrington, Rieber, & Takooshian, 1999; Iglesias, 2000).

This research was designed as an exploratory study to offer a snapshot of the college classroom in 2001, answering a few related questions: How often and extensively do psychology teachers today present the Sybil case in their classroom and, if so, how do they do so? How much are teachers aware and acceptant of recent criticisms of MPD and the Sybil case? Are there biodata correlates of the way professors present this material to students?

METHOD

A standardized 14-item survey was pilot-tested, and a final version was distributed to a wide variety of some 1,013 college psychology teachers across three groups: (a) by mail to 650 members of the Society for Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) in Greater New York, (b) by e-mail to some 40 authors of psychology textbooks analyzed by Harrington et al. (1999), and (c) by e-mail to 323 participants in the 22nd National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology in Florida. A total of 125 anonymous completed surveys were received from teachers who taught courses that might include Sybil or MPD material—including 62 of 650 New York SPSSI members, 9 of the 40 authors, and 54 of 323 NITP professors.

Overall, the 125 respondents were a highly diverse and representative group of psychology teachers. In age, they varied from their 20s to 70s, with a mean age of 53. Some 61% taught an Introduction course, 38% an Abnormal course, 20% psychotherapy, and 35% other courses that might cover MPD material. Some 42% were women; 58% were men. Some 81% had a doctoral degree; 43% were psychotherapists. The respondents averaged 16 years of teaching experience, and

the psychotherapists among them averaged 15 years of practice experience. Only 7% reported being personally familiar with a possible MPD case.

RESULTS

How often do teachers discuss the diagnosis of MPD in the classroom? As indicated in Table 1, responses varied widely, leaning towards minimal coverage—12% not at all, 53% brief mention, 34% moderately, 1% extensively, 0% for several sessions. How often do teachers discuss the specific case of Sybil? Responses were similarly varied, again leaning towards minimal coverage—26% not at all, 51% brief mention, 18% moderately, 3% extensively, 2% for several sessions.

How familiar are teachers with the general diagnoses of MPD or dissociative identity disorder (DID)? Again there is wide variation, with some 4% reporting "not at all," 24% slightly, 56% moderately, 15% extensively, 0% experts on this. How familiar are teachers with the specific case of Sybil? Similarly, 0% reported not at all, 31% slightly, 53% moderately, 15% extensively, 1% experts on this.

Do teachers today regard Sybil as a clear exemplar of MPD? Views again vary widely—11% not at all, 20% probably not, 31% don't know, 33% probably, 7% a classic case. Do teachers today consider MPD/DID to be under- or overdiagnosed today. Some four of five teachers expressed criticism or at least doubt on this—7% underdiagnosed, 12% about right, 53% overdiagnosed, 29% don't know. How

Table 1. Respondents' Answers, by Percentage Agreement and Mean Score

	1 (None)	2	3	4	5 (Most)	Mean score
1. The amount of time you have spent on the topic of multiple personality in your courses?	11.6	53.6	33.9	0.9	0.0	2.24
2. How often have you cited the Sybil case in your course?	25.7	51.3	18.6	2.7	1.8	2.03
3. How familiar are you with the work on multiple personality or dissociated identity disorder?	3.5	23.9	55.8	15.0	0.0	2.84
4. Are you familiar at all with the Sybil case?	0.0	31.0	53.1	15.0	0.9	2.85
5. From what you know of the Sybil case, is it a clear exemplar of multiple personality?	10.6	19.5	31.0	32.7	6.2	3.04
6. Do you consider MPD/DID to be under- or overdiagnosed today?	—	7.1	11.5	53.1	—	3.16
7. Have you heard much in 1998 about the renewed discussion of the original Sybil case?	55.9	26.5	11.5	5.3	—	1.67

Table II. Intercorrelations of Teachers' Views and Biodata

	1-Time	2-Cite	3-MPD	4-Sybil	5-Exem	6-Diag	7-Renew
1. Time on MPD?							
2. Cite Sybil?	.45**						
3. Familiar—MPD?	.38**	.30**					
4. Familiar—Sybil	.24**	.59**	.44				
5. Sybil exemplar?	.07	.09	-.11	.08			
6. Diagnosis today?	.05	-.02	-.07	-.07	.15		
7. Renewed discussion?	.16	.42**	.26**	.41**	-.44**	.01	
8. Age?	.02	.09	.03	-.07	-.08	-.07	.22*
9. Gender? (1 = m, 2 = f)	.10	.10	-.04	.13	.11	.07	.02
10. Doctoral degree?	.09	-.08	.03	.03	-.17	.07	.23*
11. Psychotherapist?	.05	.12	.05	-.02	-.03	.06	.06
12. Years doing therapy?	-.04	.01	.04	-.12	.06	.22	.24
13. Years teaching?	.04	.09	.07	-.03	-.08	.10	.29*
14. Experience with MPD?	-.15	-.08	.07	-.03	-.33**	-.18	.16
15. Author of textbook?	.09	-.09	.15	.01	-.34**	-.34**	.22*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

much are teachers aware of the 1998 renewed discussion of the Sybil case. Not much—56% not at all, 27% slightly, 12% moderately, 5% extensively.

Which teachers are more familiar with MPD or the Sybil case? As indicated in the intercorrelations in Table II, there was no clear link between teachers' self-reported familiarity with MPD or Sybil and any of their demographics—age, gender, psychotherapy experience, or years of teaching or practice.

Which teachers are likely to discuss Sybil more in class? Understandably, the most significant correlates were their self-reported familiarity with the Sybil case ($r = .59$, $p < .01$), and with MPD diagnosis ($r = .30$). Again, there were no significant correlations at all with teachers' age ($r = .00$), years of teaching ($r = .09$), being a therapist ($r = .12$), or years of practice ($r = .01$). However, it seems clear some of the classroom time spent discussing the Sybil case is critical of it, because this correlates only $r = .09$ with whether teachers view it as an exemplar, but $r = .42$ with teachers' awareness of the post-1998 criticisms of the case.

Which teachers regard Sybil as a poor or good exemplar of MPD? The only three significant correlates of this indicate that the Sybil case is viewed less favorably by the nine textbook authors ($r = -.34$), by those 7% who had some direct experience with a possible MPD case ($r = -.33$), and those most aware of the recent revelations about the Sybil case ($r = .41$).

Which teachers are most aware of the recent critiques of the Sybil case? Teacher demographics prove relevant here, as the teachers most aware tend to be significantly older ($r = .22$), have a doctoral degree ($r = .23$), and teach for more years ($r = .29$). Happily, the nine textbook authors also reported more awareness of the recent critiques of Sybil ($r = .22$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

One apparent reason why Rieber's 1998 release of the Sybil audiotapes was so readily welcomed by colleagues and the media was that it provided conclusive evidence confirming the long-standing doubts about MPD already swirling among psychotherapists (Ritter, 1998). For example, in response to Rieber's 1998 exposé, psychiatrist Herbert Spiegel also revealed that he too had treated Sybil in the early 1970s, and when he cautioned author Flora Rheta Schreiber that Sybil had no multiple personalities, she reportedly told Spiegel, "If we don't call it multiple personality the publisher won't want it, it won't sell" (Ritter, 1998, p. A6).

The lesson for psychology teachers today seems clear—not to ignore the Sybil case as if it never occurred, but rather to communicate it for what it is, a valuable example of a popular myth once accepted by psychology until it was ultimately corrected by our self-corrective science. Still, one troubling anomaly in the present survey findings is that a 69% majority of teachers regarded their familiarity with the Sybil case as moderate, extensive, or expert, yet 82% reported little or no awareness at all of the post-1998 critiques of the Sybil case.

An overall pattern in these findings emerges: A majority of teachers spend little or no time discussing MPD (65%) or the Sybil case (77%) in class. A majority regard themselves as moderately or extensively familiar with MPD (71%) and the Sybil case (69%), and a sizable 39% minority of teachers continue to regard the Sybil case as a good or even classic exemplar of MPD. Sadly, an 82% majority of teachers report little or no awareness of the post-1998 revelations about the Sybil case.

So what should teachers ideally report about Sybil to their students? We suggest these five guidelines to our teaching colleagues:

1. *Value*: Do not avoid the Sybil case, but describe it for what it is—a pivotal and illuminating episode in the history of psychotherapy.
2. *Original meaning*: From its debut in 1973, the Sybil case was quickly embraced by the public and psychologists as a clear exemplar of MPD, a dramatic description of how the depth techniques of psychotherapy can seemingly reveal some 16 personalities within one individual.
3. *Redefinition*: With the continuous refinement of our methods of psychotherapy since the 1970s—through debates like false/recovered memory, the nature of hypnosis, child sexual abuse—the diagnosis of MPD has been replaced by the more precise diagnosis of DID in the 1990s (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Brenner, 2000).
4. *New meaning*: Since revelations in 1998 exposed the artificial manufacture of Sybil's diagnosis, this case has shifted from an exemplar of the multiple personality diagnosis to an exemplar of the mistaken nature of this diagnosis.

5. *Self-correction*: This process might also be presented as a case study of the self-corrective nature of scientific inquiry, in which a mistaken view of the field will eventually be revealed and corrected by our scientific methods.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully thank those research assistants who deftly aided in conducting this survey: Shelly Anday, Rodolfo Flores, Emily Myers.

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