

Classifications of Dissociation: Bridging Disciplines to Understand States of Consciousness

Mind Over Mind:

The Anthropology and Psychology of Spirit Possession

By Morton Klass

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Guardian or visiting spirits that come bidden or unbidden, who protect and ward off danger or are associated with demonic forces of evil are the subjects of Morton Klass's posthumously published work, *Mind over Mind: The Anthropology and Psychology of Spirit Possession*. In this concise and refreshingly transdisciplinary work, we are invited to consider what is happening when people lose their sense of self and are moved by a willpower with which they do not directly identify. Drawing on a lifetime of study, Klass compares and contrasts what in anthropology circles is called "spirit possession" and what psychologists call "dissociative identity disorder." Klass questions the wisdom of having hard and fast boundaries between academic disciplines and argues that these divisions prevent development of general understanding. Making a transdisciplinary inquiry into the meaning of consciousness, including the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, psychiatry, and religious studies, Klass works to synthesize an understanding of dissociation and form a foundation of knowledge from which to derive a new system for classifying pathological and non-pathological states of spirit possession, trance, and dissociation.

For over a century, anthropologists have made observations and written reports on a diversity of cultures and societies that demonstrate a similar phenomenon of mind over mind, or spirit possession. Klass articulates two general explanations of possession given in the field of anthropology. The British armchair anthropologist and folklorist, James Frazer, argues that people who claim to have experiences of spirit possession are probably faking or lying. Alternatively, American anthropologist, Paul Radin, explains spirit possession as occurring when people, possibly in a beginning phase of trance, are experiencing and living out personal fantasies and illusions.

Klass is confused by these explanations because he observes that many communities respect and support people capable of some forms of spirit possession. Some people in states of possession are seen as having special healing powers and are selected for special honours by their community. Klass credits community members with being able to discern who in their community is mentally disturbed or who has moral shortcomings. Fakers, liars, and the mentally disturbed would not be people honoured in the community as having special gifts and entrusted with the responsibility to heal. If some people who experience dissociation are not faking, are not deluded, and are supported and valued in their societies then it becomes all the more important that a clear and distinct understanding of possession be formulated to distinguish forms of possession that constitute dimensions of healing.

Klass's comparative cultural research of mental processes provides a fresh perspective on psychological and anthropological phenomena. His perspective is refreshing because he is not wedded to stale metaphors or conventional explanations. With a transdisciplinary stance, he is able to shed a cultural light on psychological phenomena and correct misconceptions that have developed because of a lack of communication across disciplines. For example, Klass works to undo some of the damage caused by the pejorative distinction, originally formed in anthropology, between so-called "primitive" and "civilized" practices and beliefs. As an anthropologist, he expresses a personal commitment to redress the misconception that "primitive" cultures are "uncivilized." Disciplines like psychology, psychiatry, and religious studies continue to make use of this anthropological distinction even though, more recently, scholars in anthropology and sociology have carefully deconstructed its meaning. Perceiving traditional beliefs and customs as primitive while valuing civilized knowledge in exclusively techno-rational terms is seen as mistakenly oversimplified in the discipline of anthropology, even though, ironically, it was anthropology that originally generated this understanding. The "primitive/civilized" distinction, however, is subtly perpetuated by psychology's classification of dissociation as mental disorder.

In a brief history of ideas on dissociation in psychology and psychiatry, Klass notes that dissociation always tends to be linked with a notion of mental disorder. The general consensus from field researchers in anthropology, Klass tells us, is that people in these alternate states of consciousness are not faking and usually are not psychologically disordered. He likens spirit possession to the Western psychiatric notion of dissociative identity disorder and argues that, although these phenomena are related, dissociation is not necessarily

a pathological state. More generally, he sees spirit possession as a distinctly human phenomenon where a subordinate consciousness takes over a superordinate consciousness. From his research in anthropology and psychiatry, he develops a clear and useful classification system of the diverse forms of trance, dissociation, and possession. In proposing this alternative system of classification, Klass supports an understanding that is more respectful of cultural differences and opens space for possibilities of dissociation that are not necessarily mental disorders.

Although Klass does not make reference to some key texts in psychology (e.g., Ellenberger, 1970) and religious studies (e.g., Eliade, 1964) his work is an excellent introduction to the value of transdisciplinary study and the important distinction between pathological and non-pathological forms of dissociation. Because of its transdisciplinary content, Klass's work would be of interest to a general audience, but especially to those with a cultural interest in psychiatry and clinical psychology. Klass promotes a respectful understanding of possession and proposes many avenues for future research. In the end, we are left to explore when and how possession is a choice to nullify one's identity, and what or who does the possessing. In *Mind over Mind*, Klass serves future researchers by laying a transdisciplinary foundation and clarifying terminology by carefully describing the important differences between possessions that are bidden and unbidden, conscious and unconscious, or willed and unwilled.

References

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- Ellenberger, H. F. (1970). *The discovery of the unconscious: The history and evolution of dynamic psychiatry*. New York, NY: Basic Books.