

# Dissociation and Attachment to Companion Animals in College Students and Individuals Diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder



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## ABSTRACT

Research has made a connection between dissociation and attachment to pets (Brown & Katcher, 2001). We examined attachment to pets and stuffed animals. Seventy-two university students were divided into low and high dissociators. Eleven women with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) also participated. Low and high dissociators were not statistically different on pet attachment. However, DID participants were more attached to pets than were either low or high dissociators. Within the student sample, high dissociators were more attached to stuffed animals than were low dissociators. DID participants were also more attached to stuffed animals than were low dissociators, but were not statistically different from high dissociators. This research may open the door for replicating clinical pet-intervention studies with stuffed animal interventions.

## Introduction

- Dissociation (a lack of connection among perceptions, memories, and experiences) is an adaptive response to betrayal by a significant other
  - Unawareness of trauma allows maintenance of important attachment relationships (Freyd, 1996).
- Little research has examined the interplay of attachment to animals and severe or clinical dissociation
  - In college students, dissociation was positively related to companion animal attachment (Brown & Katcher, 1997; 2001).
  - Frequency of clinical levels of dissociation was significantly higher in participants with the highest levels of companion animal attachment than in participants with lower levels of attachment (Brown & Katcher, 1997; 2001).
  - In two additional studies, correlations between pet attachment and dissociation were statistically significant (Cromer & Freyd, 2004).

### Rationale for Current Study

Extends previous research:

- People with DID have not been systematically included in research on animal attachment.
- Examines attachment to both live animals and to stuffed toy animals.
  - Adults' attachment to stuffed animals has not been studied systematically, though there are anecdotal reports of the use of stuffed animals in therapy.

### Hypotheses

- 1) Participants with higher dissociation will be more attached to pets than will low-dissociation participants (as in prior studies).
- 2) Participants with higher dissociation will be more attached to stuffed animals than will participants with low levels of dissociation.

## Method

### Participants

Seventy-two college student participants from the University of Oregon were recruited on the basis of their scores on a dissociative measure during a general online prescreening. The low-dissociation group ( $n = 37$ ; 26 female) had a mean age of 19.32 ( $SD = 1.56$ ) and the high-dissociation group ( $n = 34$ ; 25 female) had a mean age of 19.26 ( $SD = 1.27$ ). Participants with DID were recruited as part of a larger research study, based on chart review and clinician contacts. Their mean age was 35.35 years ( $SD = 12.57$ , range = 23 – 62).

### Materials

- *Pet Attachment and Life Impact Scale (PAL; Cromer & Freyd, 2004)*
  - 33-item, 5-point Likert-type scale
  - Measures relational and emotional attachment to pets
  - Empirically developed over a period of two years across several studies.
  - Examples of relational attachment items: "A pet completes the family" and "We have a special relationship."
  - Example of emotional attachment item: "Pets provide stability for me."
- *Stuffed Animal Attachment Questionnaire (SAQ; Cromer & Freyd, 2004)*
  - 20-item, 4-point Likert-type scale
  - Examples: "My stuffed animals have personalities all their own" and "Stuffed animals can give you love."
- *Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES; Bernstein & Putnam, 1986)*
  - 28-item self-report measure
  - Assesses variety of dissociative experiences
  - Has been used extensively with a wide range of populations in countries around the world, and has been found to have strong reliability and validity (see Briere, 1997; Carlson & Putnam, 1993 for reviews).

- Procedure
- Student participants divided into low ( $DES < 10$ ) and high ( $DES > 20$ ) dissociators based on dissociation scores.
  - Students completed surveys in laboratory, with experimenter blind to participant group.
  - Participants with DID completed questionnaires as part of a larger study (Barlow, under review). DID participants' DES scores were well above clinical cutoff scores ( $M = 56.16$ ,  $SD = 21.88$ ).

### Stuffed Animal Results

ANOVA for stuffed animal attachment was significant,  $F(2, 80) = 8.13$ ,  $p < .002$ .

**Both the DID group ( $p < .02$ ,  $d = 1.05$ ) and high dissociators ( $p < .01$ ,  $d = .87$ ) were statistically higher than were low dissociators on level of stuffed animal attachment.** Post-hoc regression analyses revealed that this linear relationship across groups was driven by differences in the Absorption-Imaginative Involvement Subscale of the DES.

Although the high dissociators in the student sample were not statistically different from the DID participants in amount of stuffed animal attachment ( $p > .10$ ), overall, **attachment to pets and attachment to stuffed animals were correlated** ( $r = .35$ ,  $p < .02$ ).

## Discussion

Our first hypothesis was partially supported. The DID group was more attached to pets than were either of the student groups, with very large effect sizes. The difference between low and high dissociators in the student group was not statistically significant, but the trend was in the predicted direction.

Our second hypothesis was supported: high-dissociating students and DID participants were more attached to stuffed animals than were the low-dissociating students, again with large effect sizes.

This study may be the first to assess pet attachment systematically in a DID sample. It is also the first to assess attachment to stuffed animals in a DID sample and to compare their results with that of a nonclinical population. There are anecdotal reports of the usefulness of stuffed animals in therapy for dissociative disorders, and this area should be examined in future studies.

Interactions with companion animals have implications beyond the human-animal relationship. This research may open the door for replicating clinical pet-intervention studies with stuffed animal interventions. Future research should examine in detail the potential uses of stuffed animals in therapeutically regulating dissociative processes.

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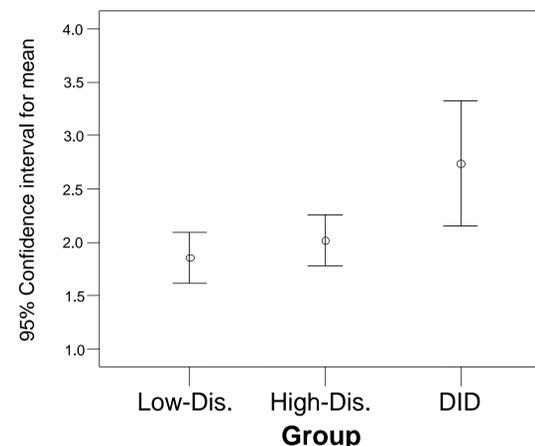
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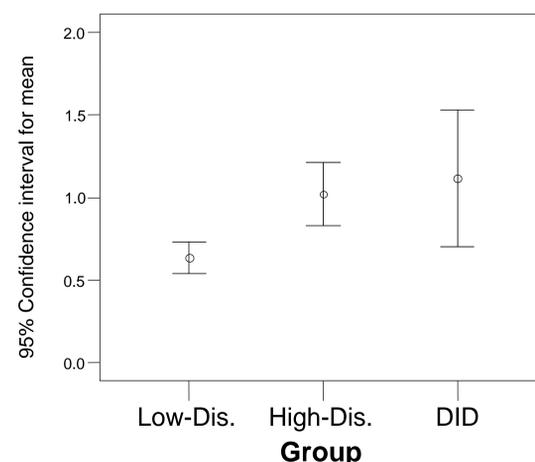
## Results

### Descriptive statistics

#### Pet Attachment



#### Stuffed Animal Attachment



## Hypothesis testing

### Pet Results

ANOVA for attachment to pets was significant,  $F(2, 80) = 6.30$ ,  $p < .005$ .

**DID participants were more attached to pets than were either low dissociators ( $p < .005$ ,  $d = 1.11$ ) or high dissociators ( $p < .02$ ,  $d = 0.92$ ).**

Tukey pairwise comparisons indicated that the college student groups were not statistically different from each other ( $p > .10$ ).