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Traumatic Stress Education & Advocacy

**Will Showtime Series *The United States of Tara*
Promote Understanding or Misconceptions?**

**NSU psychology professor Steven Gold
fears misperceptions from new TV series**

By Esther Giller

On January 18, 2009, Showtime premieres a new series produced by Stephen Spielberg about a woman with multiple personality disorder, *The United States of Tara*. Tara, played by Australian actress and Academy Award nominee Toni Collette, is a woman with multiple personality disorder (MPD), more recently known as dissociative identity disorder (DID). A show on this topic has the potential to educate those who experience MPD/DID, their friends and loved ones, and the general public. Dr. Steven N. Gold, psychology professor at Nova Southeastern University (NSU), and an expert on dissociation, is concerned that *The United States of Tara* could also create some misunderstanding. Gold runs a clinic at NSU where he trains doctoral psychology students to identify and treat dissociation and related disorders.

“The main character in the show, Tara, doesn’t act at all the way the majority of people with MPD/DID do,” Gold says. “The show presents an extreme version of DID that is only seen in a small minority of people who have it, and even then usually only occurs during periods of severe stress.” Gold explains that the 30-minute pilot episode of the show portrays the title character and her family in a way that misleads both about the nature of DID and about how to effectively

address it. “The greatest misconception portrayed on the show is that it is common for people with DID to switch from one personality to another in a way that is obvious to others. Several times during the 30-minute pilot episode Tara changes her speech patterns, mannerisms, and even her clothing in a way that clearly signals to her family and even to members of the surrounding community that she has assumed an altered identity,” Gold observes. In the most dramatic instance of this, she adopts a male identity and attends a school performance by her daughter dressed as a man.

Some of the major consequences of misleading portrayals of DID are

- widespread skepticism among the general public and mental health professionals about the reality of DID;
- the risk of hindering detection of clients with DID whose clinical picture is very different from that of Tara’s;
- the creation of confusion and fear in clients with DID that they eventually will display behaviors as dramatic as Tara’s, or concerns that their experience does not really constitute DID because it is so different from Tara’s.

Gold believes that “the most serious consequence is that people with DID who wish to enjoy happier, more productive lives will be discouraged from seeking help to accomplish this. A number of therapeutic approaches have been developed that help people with DID feel better, function better, and experience a more peaceful and predictable existence. People with DID need to know that effective help is available.”

“Most people with DID,” according to Gold, “work hard not to let the outside world see evidence of their inner sense of having more than one sense of self. Rapid and externally observable changes in self-presentation and dramatic shifts in voice quality and facial expression are not frequently seen in most individuals with DID, especially not on an ongoing basis as opposed to briefly under severe

anxiety. Their inner experience may shift, but most of them work very hard not to allow this to be detectable to others.”

“It is also troubling,” Gold says, “the way Tara acts in front of her teenage son and daughter and the way her husband and children respond to her. When Tara, for example, assumes the identity of a seductive teenage girl, the rest of the family, including her adolescent children, take her bizarre and, at times, overtly lewd behavior in stride, treating her with calm amusement. There are very few instances in the pilot of others taking exception to her outrageous behavior or attempting to set limits on it. Instead, the general attitude conveyed is that extreme behavior is what is to be expected from people with DID and it therefore must simply be tolerated. It is not made clear that the way she is acting may be detrimental to the children or constitutes inappropriate parenting.”

“While this type of response may seem accepting to some,” Gold clarifies, “it is actually detrimental to people with DID because it does not provide any external incentive to develop a greater level of self-control. The majority of people with DID aspire to a life that is more functional and less chaotic. For them, Tara’s extreme behavior and her family’s resignation to it would probably be disturbing rather than reassuring.”

Scientific researchers and mental health professionals have learned much about DID in the past 30 years, said Gold. “It is much more widely recognized that DID is one of a range of disorders of dissociation, disorders characterized by disconnection between experiences that are usually integrated. Dissociative experiences include psychologically based amnesia, spaciness, depersonalization, and derealization – the feeling that one is not real and feeling that one’s surroundings are not real. Like anxiety and depression, these are common experiences in the general population that, unless they significantly interfere with daily functioning, are not necessarily indicators of abnormality or the presence of a disorder.

Gold acknowledges that a number of challenges remain in obtaining a better understanding of DID. “Although the scientific understanding of DID has grown markedly since the 1980s, most mental health professionals know very little about this body of professional literature. A major challenge to greater understanding of DID is better education of mental health professionals about DID, its prevalence, and its treatment.”

To its credit, Showtime has set up the following interview with Dr. Richard Kluff, one of the foremost experts on dissociation:

<http://www.sho.com/site/video/brightcove/series/title.do?bcpid=1847322218&bclid=5253538001>. They have also allocated space on their website for background information, sending viewers to the websites of the Sidran Institute, www.sidran.org, and that of the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation, www.isst-d.org.

Steven N. Gold, Ph.D., is a member of Sidran Institute's Governing Board. He is also President, American Psychological Association, Division 56 (Trauma Psychology) (www.apatraumadivision.org); Editor, *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* (www.apa.org/journals/tra/); Professor, Center for Psychological Studies (www.cps.nova.edu); Director, Trauma Resolution & Integration Program (www.nova.edu/trip/).

To contact Dr. Gold for an interview please call 410-825-8888, ext. 210.