

Youth Support - Professional Training

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"Divided loyalties - the schizoid teenager".

Divided Loyalties - The Schizoid personality

'Divided loyalties'

Hitchcock and film makers like him implanted in our minds the fascination for the split personality, the good and bad, devil and angel. It is certainly intriguingly convenient to imagine that an unknown part of oneself can commit crime, murder and behave in a thoroughly scandalous manner without the knowledge of the 'good side'. Thus all feeling for the 'crime' is lost, all responsibility and all guilt. Despite the obvious gain to the film industry, such caricaturing of the notion of the 'schizoid' character has done a great disservice in understanding what is after all part of our human defence mechanisms.

While it may be valid to regard the schizoid defence as a division in the personality, in that good and bad parts are kept apart - in other words the manifestation of good and bad 'internal objects' is not experienced as an integrated whole. It is however more readily demonstrable as a split in the external world - parts of which are experienced as black or white, others are seen as entirely good or entirely bad and their separate attributes cannot be fused into a manageable whole, a 'real' person. Conveniently the mother who fails to give the infant what he needs can be seen as an 'all bad' evil witch deserving of his hate, while the 'good' caring side of mother can be split off and placed out of mind. Hence aspects of life which we do not wish to face up to can be split off and 'forgotten' until it suits us to remember.

When 'splitting' becomes extreme, some would use the term 'borderline' personality - a rather unhelpful definition indicating that one's hold on reality is being lost.

Just as a 'hysterical' attitude has been associated with women's demonstration of inner hurt and rejection, so it appears that a 'schizoid' manifestation is more prevalent in males. It may be interesting to speculate whether society's role images of male and female give rise to this gender difference in that it is more acceptable for women to express emotion and be 'histrionic' and more so for men to be closed off and distant. However, without wishing to sound sexist in any way, that argument will have to take place elsewhere - suffice it to say that in practice, this is the pattern commonly witnessed.

The individual functioning in a 'schizoid' mode gives the appearance of being self sufficient, controlled, superior and in no way needing the help or affection of another human being. He may make it seem that he is honouring you with his presence and attention but that really he is in no way desirous of your company. He will usually come for therapy at the instigation of a family member or 'potential' friend and will humour the therapist with statements he has decided he should make but which he sees little point in.

Thus Tom attended a self help group 'to see if he could offer some advice' to the members whom he thought must be able to benefit from his logical approach to problems. The teenage members quickly christened him with the nickname 'Mr Normal' which he professed he was although most had an uncomfortable feeling that he was probably the most troubled person in the

room. Being able to see through the invulnerable unfeeling persona to the unloved and 'unlovable' child within is an uphill task, but capable of bringing a rich reward to both patient and therapist.

The child who develops a schizoid approach to life has been severely let down in his relationships at a very early stage. The interaction with his mother and thus the development of his 'object relations' is seriously impaired to the extent that rather than 'hysterically' berate the mother for not fulfilling his ideals; or 'depressively' ache for the affection and regard of a mother who is unable to love him because of some failing in his regard for her; he has decided that he does not need or desire this absent love. Relationships are superfluous to his inner space and he can create and believe in his own world which will not let him down.

In reality he has decided to dispense with his 'true self' it being too painful to consider and to actively emphasise the features of his 'false self'. His 'true self' is thus absent, removed from the possibility of engagement with another, hidden from himself and others and unavailable to any potential relationship.

Why is a relationship with another so threatening and frightening? Perhaps the early loss of mother, or 'the good object' was so devastating that the risk of loss, of the investment in another relationship which could go wrong is not a possibility to be considered.

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Paul came from an Austrian background. His father had been brought to England as a teenager at a time when his Jewish family were suffering persecution. The family had been forced to move a number of times and Paul's father recounted times when he was furtively hurried along streets by his mother, crossing the road so as not to talk to people and risk revealing their identity. Eventually the two fled to England leaving the rest of the family supposedly to follow - which they never did. The young boy studied hard, his mother died young leaving him to fend for himself, which he did by working in and later managing a little shop. He married an English girl and took her name to hide his Germanic and Jewish origins. He had thus supposedly escaped from his difficult upbringing and had started a new life with a new family.

Despite his father's new found happiness and security, Paul felt himself born into a world bereft of love and feelings. He 'tuned in' to his father's remoteness and his mother's need for an unemotional man. He decided that he was a 'child of the holocaust', that he had to guard against too close contact with people, that he had to hide his true identity (even to the extent of not giving his real name) and that there was no point in having ties with people because you had to leave them.

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The risk of potential unbearable loss may prohibit the development of a close relationship. Demonstration of emotion,

exposure of one's self to another may also be extremely threatening. Letting down one's guard implies loss of power, loss of protection and thus the possibility of being overpowered, engulfed by, and lost in, another. It therefore becomes important to maintain power, strength and domination - not to allow emotion to betray inner weakness. The protective mantle of a sense of superiority and aloofness merely serves to further distance others thus reinforcing the life position that - 'There's no point in getting close to people, they only let you down'. Life without feelings becomes empty and meaningless - as is the inner world of such an individual. Anyone allowed to get too close, might see this emptiness for what it is - a vacuum of emptiness within which the pain of imprisonment is heightened by the terror that closeness could bring about implosion, destruction - like the shattering of the glass of a Victorian vacuum jar.

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As Paul left school and entered college he found it difficult to focus his attention on a particular subject. At first he studied English and History, from an 'intellectual' point of view; but he became dissatisfied after a period of work experience in a school brought him more into contact with people's problems. He thus turned to computing where he could be more certain of a detached working relationship with his machines.

Social life took a similar turn. Not able to commit himself to a deep relationship, he threw himself into one affair after another always appearing to give just enough of himself while really revealing nothing. Each ended in a 'civilised' way so as not to provoke too much emotion or hurt and with the intention of remaining good friends. Paul was as afraid of others emotions as he was of his own and went to great pains to ensure that he did not appear to be 'leaving' a girlfriend. He would not have been able to cope with the idea of 'hurting mother' and was afraid of his emptiness harming someone else. Paul could not commit himself, but could not say 'goodbye' to the extent that more than once he ended up living with an exgirlfriend - who was thus no longer threatening while appearing to relate to another, from whom he was partially protected.

Paul's turning point in therapy came about one Christmas when he unexpectedly brought me a present of a tiny father Christmas in a glass jar - 'That's me'.

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Not being able to see 'mother' as a whole and thus not being able to see women as real people obviously deeply affects developing sexuality and sexual relationships. A mother can be the adored object of perfect love - the Madonna figure, she has also tainted that purity by being a sexual woman - hence she is also a whore. An inability to see both as parts of an integral woman results in relationships being flavoured by this split. Hence the man who is impotent with his wife, because he cannot have sex with his 'pure' mother

and thus corrupt her, but is quite capable of having sex (without love) with a prostitute.

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Kevin presented ostensibly by way of clearing things up for his son. The boy had at fifteen been found hanging in his bedroom and a verdict of suicide had been given. Kevin took a long time to come to the point, that he had found 'things' in his son's bedroom which led him to believe that he had not taken his life, but rather that he had died in a clumsy sexual act, having hung himself to enhance sexual excitement.

Kevin was naturally distressed by his son's death, but his greatest torment was that his son had somehow inherited some abnormal sexual urges from him, and that thus he was in a way responsible for his death.

Kevin had experienced a certain amount of guilt that he had never been very close with his wife and he felt that he had not been able to satisfy her sexually. As a child he had not been very close to his own parents and was a lonely boy who did not mix much in school.

At the age of fifteen, the same age at which his son met his death, he was shocked to discover that he was in fact adopted. It was at about that time that he began to take some of his mothers clothes, particularly shoes to try to feel close to her and his masturbatory fantasies included her tennis shoes.

As an adult he had not had many girlfriends, although prior to his marriage he had sometimes used prostitutes and indulged in sadomasochistic practices. With his wife, he felt cheated that he seldom felt aroused and when he did so he practically always had to imagine her wearing tennis shoes.

Kevin thought that his coldness, his distance as a father had driven his son to his dangerous and eventually fatal exercise.

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Kevin's infantile rejection, although out of conscious memory, had produced a 'split' in his inner world. Nurtured by an unfeeling childhood, the ideal mother and the whore literally fell apart on his discovery of his adoption. The 'mother' before him had not borne him, had not been endowed with the purity of his distant Madonna, but gave herself, barren and whore like to a man who was not his father. He saw only the whore, his only sexual image being attached to this woman hence the development of his fetishism and the sadomasochistic urge to dominate and be dominated by her.

The need is to dominate or risk loss of oneself by being dominated - to maintain superiority and power. Problems and conflicts are intellectualised so that emotion is kept at bay and those around who do react emotionally are seen as weaker fallible beings.

There may be what seems to be a feigned attitude of concern in the fate of other human beings, particularly if such a stance is seen as advantageous, something to boost his standing in the eyes of others, but the overall impression is

of an intellectual exercise. Action coming from head rather than heart.

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Hugh spent a lot of time working on the image he presented to people. He liked to show his extensive knowledge of a number of fields and demonstrate how widely read he had become. On attending a friend's jazz concert at University, rather than spontaneously delight in an entertaining performance, he had to formulate a compliment to the player which included the names of famous saxophonists - thus exhibiting his own apparent mastery.

When another friend was in trouble with the law, due to a false accusation, Hugh got his father to hire a solicitor and directed exactly what should be done - not out of human compassion, but rather as a show of competence and emotionally detached capability. At other times he would be able to completely disregard norms of behaviour as when, for instance, he fraudulently removed money from a neighbour's savings account - in an admittedly clever manner - without any remorse or guilt attached.

In therapy Hugh described a 'lost boy' completely out of touch with his 'true self' yet beginning to realise the void left by it's absence.

"I sometimes feel that everything about me is false. I know that I will try to lie and cheat my way out of any situation if I can. I cheated at school and was never found out. I tell lies just for the sake of it.

.... Do you know that I even read the paper every morning and memorise what some of the columnists say - just so that later in the day I can come out with those comments and pretend that I thought of them! I wanted to look clever, but it was all a lie. .. I think now that I am really cheating myself and I just wish that someone would stop me, bring me up against the truth - just get me in a situation where I have to be straight with myself.

The nearest I have ever come to facing the truth I think, is when I am doing some sport. It is as if out there, it's just me, my body performing and I can't cheat then - but sometimes I can't face even that, like lately, I've had so many illnesses and injuries keeping me from training.

.... Do you think I'm avoiding something?"

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The healing process involves the painful unmasking of the 'false self' for what it is before the 'true self' can be slowly discovered. Unfortunately falsity is by nature, persistent in it's pernicious hold on the self and one lie gives birth to another thus compounding the position.

As one alcoholic woman said "It was as if I was in a barrel rolling down hill and each time I told a lie or believed a lie, the barrel moved faster. ... I wanted to stop lying and make the barrel stop, but I was afraid that if I tried to stop it by putting my legs out, they would break off and I would stay trapped inside."

It is often said that to succeed in a science or to be a creative writer, you have to be detached from emotions and cut yourself off from intrusive relationships. Thus many successful and famous people have demonstrated the splits and detachment described. It is my belief that there are as many creative and brilliant people, if not more, who have not shown such painful disturbance. However, given the schizoid need to appear superior, there will obviously be those who are indeed very capable and of superior intelligence and also those who would want us to believe themselves gifted but who are living a lie.

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Walter, an extremely disturbed patient, (who one could perhaps describe as 'borderline') was brought to my attention by one of his friends who was so upset by the enigma of his personality that he no longer felt in touch with his own reality. This is how he described their relationship at a time when they were both in college together -

"I just don't know where I am with him any more. I listen to him telling me dreadful stories about being let down by someone who I thought was OK, and I have to believe him. Then I help him out and what does he do - turn on me, exploit me - and when I pull him up about it, he makes me feel guilty. I asked him, 'Do you think this is how you should be treating a friend?' but he doesn't understand, he thinks he's been wonderful to you. . . . Anyway I don't even think he realises what it is to have friends, some people have been very loyal to him and when it suits him, he just casts them aside as if they were nothing to him - as if they suddenly stopped existing. He screws me up so much with his lies, but I think the problem is that he believes them, so you end up thinking you should too, then you wonder, 'how do I know what is truth and what's a lie?' maybe I'm the one whose lying - and that's madness!"

Walter always said he would become a famous scientist, he spoke of himself as a new Faraday or Newton and developed expansive plans about his future, .. sought out for consultancy by large companies, inventor of new principles and owner of many patents. Even as a student he began wheeling and dealing, trying to do his work in his own way, copying others ideas as if they were his own. . . . Walter was very plausible in professional and social situations, expounding at length on scientific principles - quite literally blinding with science - and his monologues would be described as 'brilliant expositions' or 'pompous pontificating' by those around him. He was obviously very intelligent and certainly knew his subject inside out - or did he?

There was a very 'king's new clothes' flavour about his relationships at home or work - as if everyone felt uneasy about being duped by him, yet afraid to confront the situation. Those unlucky individuals who did question his perception let themselves in for a long verbal explanation to which no questions could be addressed.

When, as frequently happened, one of his projects went wrong, a colleague or friend felt let down, or his superiors

criticised his work, Walter was a master at turning the situation on it's head, so that he, Walter was the wronged one and his Professor should at the very least be grateful for all that he had done to try to salvage the situation. No fault or responsibility could ever be laid at Walter's door.

The problem for Walter was that he so profoundly believed his own lies, he so completely became the false self, that all knowledge of the true self disappeared. In addition, it seemed that any attempt to resurrect the truth, met with anger and an attempt to destroy the source of this alternative interpretation. An inner anger consumed him and broke out at intervals with intense violence. The anger seemed to be a manifestation of fear, fear of being 'found out' and a terror of being engulfed.

Walter had been unable to work with several therapists - all of them were incompetent anyway and he knew more about therapy than they did. He only saw them to help them treat his family because they were making a mess of their lives too - his father would not speak to him, his mother kept breaking down. Walter placed intense pressure on all those around him, they either had to be totally for him, unquestioningly obedient or were entirely against him, there was only deep black or shining white in his entirely split world.

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How can we understand such a disturbed personality? To begin to empathise with a man who betrays his friends, cheats and lies? Seeing the 'splitting' mechanism as a defence can be the key to deeper understanding. What is it that needs defending at so high a cost? What or who is being protected?

Let us consider the frightened child, hiding away. The true nature of that child is hiding in terror of discovery, of being hurt, of being annihilated.

Such absolute protection of the true self can be associated with intense rejection often accompanied by infantile abuse. Nothing concrete ever came to light in this case - the history was too carefully defended - but one of Walter's therapists interpreting a dream sequence, became aware that abuse had been the root cause, that Walter had probably been molested at a very early stage of infancy - before conscious memory - and probably by his mother. Such devastating early experiences are being recognised more frequently nowadays, although for a long time neither the professional community nor the general public would allow the possibility of such events to be acknowledged.

Walter's abused infant was split off and buried deep out of consciousness while his false self proceeded to wreak revenge on those daring to venture close enough to be identified as potential abusers.

Of course this example is an extreme one and certainly not all adults who use 'splitting' as a defence have been abused as infants or in their childhood. However, the proportion who have we will never know - hiding the true self also hides the memory.

Whatever the 'cause' of the initial splitting, suffice it to say that the developing infant was damaged to the extent

that he recognised a threat to his existence. He perceived the fact that it is dangerous to show your true self and that getting close to others is a potentially risky practice.

Giving the hurt child the confidence to let down the defence and 'come out and play' is the ultimate aim of therapy. Having enough trust in another human being to be able to briefly shed the false persona and allow the warmth of human feeling, another's unconditional love, to filter through may be the first important step towards rejoining the human race.

