

# The Silent Epidemic of "Self-Estrangement" Among Today's Adolescents and Young Adults

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As a volunteer alumnus interviewer for my college, I notice it when speaking with high school seniors who are applying for admission to my alma mater. I experience it in everyday life in my community. And I observe it most notably in my work as a clinical psychologist in psychotherapy sessions all day long with children, families, and parents. A colleague of mine calls it a "zombie-like stupor," and several high school teachers who commonly refer to my practice characterize it as a kind of "loss of identity or soul."

## ***The Phenomenon of "Self-Estrangement"***

There is an undeniable trend among children today who simply do not seem to "know" themselves and struggle to merely describe how they think and feel about themselves, their identity, and their hopes, dreams, and desires. This dimming of identity is present with regard to basic likes and dislikes as well as the more substantial components of self-concept including intellectual interests, career aspirations, even the most favorable personal experiences in one's lifetime thus far.

From a psychological standpoint, at the core of this phenomenon of self-estrangement is a rudderless identity formation that features three main components:

- (1) an attenuated personal agency;
- (2) an under-developed capacity to observe and make use of one's own emotional experiences and relationships;
- (3) and a chameleon-like tendency toward censorship in order to meet the demands of any audience whose approval the child seeks.

## ***Loss of Drive or Motivation***

A prominent characteristic of self-estrangement seems to involve a fundamental lack of drive or internal source of motivation. A predominant attitude among many children and adolescents is that "if it is too hard, don't do it." In fact, I have worked in psychotherapy with a number of teens who are extremely proud of their expressed investment in not "wasting energy" on activities and efforts that, in their estimation, will fail to bring them any substantial return on their investment. Whether this motto is applied to academic performance, social relationships, sports, etc., these youths lean toward a rather passive, restrictive, and appraisal-oriented view of the world where the engagement in new experiences and effortful exploration -- for growth, learning, and experimentation -- is surprisingly frowned upon.

## ***A Culture of Non-Relational Experience***

The proliferation of technology, the internet, and the dominance of digital as opposed to face-to-face interpersonal experience likely has a role in the self-estrangement epidemic. The diminishment of basic social capacities including "emotional IQ" and being able to "read" nonverbal communications is receiving considerable support in the scientific literature. My adolescent patients often describe sitting in their school cafeterias eating lunch surrounded by peers who are immersed in their cell phones.

Moreover, today many youths opt out of social situations and numerous other contexts that hold the potential to reveal any personal limitations or physical or personality features viewed to be undesirable. The "selfie" is perhaps the most iconic image of our time that substantiates this point! This exaggerated focus on being liked and admired, and concealing one's blemishes and limitations, undoubtedly limits the number of opportunities for kids to engage in spontaneous new experiences and interpersonal situations in a non-self-conscious way. If children are reluctant to be who they really are and actively guard against having their identity visible to the world, then it is inevitable that self-estrangement would gradually and insidiously evolve.

### ***The Erosion of the Parent-Child Relationship***

Psychologists and researchers have documented how the quality of the parent-child relationship seems to be poorer today than in previous generations. Many contemporary parents struggle with having any kind of a relationship with their children. Furthermore, the notion of a family identity, i.e., a family culture in which each member contributes to the functioning of the household and plays a significant role in the system, is largely absent. In my 4-hour relational parenting workshop I regularly facilitate, parents are thirsty for learning strategies to communicate with their children more effectively and promote a family environment of warmth, respect, and empathy for others' feelings.

### ***A Society Against Disappointment and Failure***

Existing in a society largely oriented toward the proverbial "trophy for participating" appears to have deleterious effects on children's ability to "find" themselves.

My own personal experience as a 12-year-old state champion swimmer in the 50-yard freestyle was sobered several months after my win when my father showed me the heat times of the age group national championship. When I reviewed the heat times of this more prestigious competition, I was catapulted into the realization that I was, no matter how much I would have preferred not to know, a "big fish in a little pond"; I was shocked to learn that my state championship time would not even have achieved a ranking in the top 50 among 12-year-old boys in the nation. In that moment, I believe I learned more about myself than I had ever learned before: the reality of competition and its resultant refining of who I thought I was stimulated in me humility, a broader realization of my own limitations, and an aversion to resting on one's laurels.

Similarly, instructors at the high school and college levels who are frequently pressured to inflate grades for a variety of reasons including the view that a grade higher than what a student actually deserves will be supportive and encouraging are, in my view, misguided. Knowing where one stands, truthfully and

honestly, in comparison to others, helps orient the self to one's position in the world and may ultimately be a source of inspiration and ambition.

### ***"The Capacity To Be Alone"***

The renowned English pediatrician and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott coined the term "the capacity to be alone" to describe an important transition in human development. For Winnicott, early development involves the infant's "relating" to the parental figure. That is, the infant, entirely dependent upon the primary caregiver for sustenance, is prone to accommodating to the parent through censorship, self-denial, and the repression of urges to insure that the infant gets what he or she needs. Gradually, Winnicott argued, the child must then transition from "relating" to "using" the parent. As this transition occurs, the child enters a realm in which his or her attention shifts from a focus on appealing to the parent to an emphasis on how one feels and what one wants. Winnicott emphasized that, if this transition is achieved, the child ultimately learns how to balance a recognition of the importance of others with an equally potent awareness that one's own internal experience is valid, worthwhile, and need not be censored.

Unfortunately, the epidemic of self-estrangement features a notable deficit in the capacity of many children to be alone. It is important to note, however, that parents can learn to support their children's capacity to be alone. This involves helping parents find ways to bypass "transactions" with their children (that are essentially invitations for battle on the part of the child to avoid his/her difficult inner experience and emotions), and, instead, steer the exchange toward "witnessing" in which the parent positions him- or herself as a "mirror" of the child's subjective experience.. The work of Daniel Siegel and other neuroscientists indicates that the mirroring function of the parent supports the neuronal density of the child's brain and facilitates important connections between the emotional and thinking parts of the mind, all of which facilitates identity development.

### ***Five Self-Estrangement Personality Types Among Youths***

Below I categorize five self-estrangement personality types I commonly see by the onset of adolescence. To be sure, these categorizations do not correspond to any official psychiatric diagnoses in the fields of psychiatry or psychology. The five types I describe are drawn from anecdotal evidence in my clinical practice and are often what parents describe when they contact a psychotherapist or counselor concerned about their child's functioning and behavior.

**#1: The Self-Conscious Personality Type:** This youth is highly concerned about achievement, success, and evaluation, and is engrossed in what is required or expected of him/her at the expense of pursuing pleasurable leisure activities. Many of these children experience anxiety and depressive symptoms. Many are highly self-punitive, criticizing themselves in contrast to an exaggerated acceptance of others ; they see themselves as never "good enough" and others as "normal" or "better." Overall, an intensive self-consciousness and fear of failure obstruct this child's access to finding who he or she really is.

**# 2: The Self-Sabotaging or Exaggerated Personality Type:** Unable to locate a personal identity, these youths seek to oppose expectations of them (often held by parents, teachers, coaches, etc.) in order to oppose an identity they perceive as being foisted upon them. Hence, for these youths it is through the very act of opposition that they find themselves -- a pattern most easily apparent in unconscious self-sabotage tactics. A close cousin of the self-saboteur, the exaggerated type, seeks to dramatize any particular characteristics of the self (hair color, dress, attitude, activity, etc.) in order to *coerce the world to oppose the exaggeration*. In this strategy, these youths seek not to oppose, but instead, to be opposed -- a tactic which ultimately camouflages all authentic components of the identity.

**#3: The Achieving/"False Self" Identity:** This child essentially foregoes accessing and manifesting one's authentic characteristics, desires, and instincts in order to avoid offending or coming into conflict with an important other, i.e., a parent, teacher, friend, etc. In essence, this type of personality is formed by the failure of the child to transition from "relating" to "using" others in Winnicott's terminology. An equal balance between concern for the other and concern for the self has not been achieved, and the child opts toward the former. As a psychotherapist, I have come to believe that the so-called "midlife crisis" may actually be the inner turmoil no longer deniable by the adult who has adopted a "false self" personality type since childhood and can no longer ignore the self that was never fully embodied.

**#4: The Entitled ("Narcissistic") Identity:** No longer an attitude primarily linked with children in affluent regions but now observed across all levels of socioeconomic status, the "narcissistic" identity finds refuge in diminishing others along with one's need for others. Often unconscious in its origin, narcissism is usually the consequence of the child's frustration with and disappointment in others who do not respond to his or her needs, communications, and qualities. At some point, a "straw breaks the camel's back" and the rejected child psychologically and emotionally retreats from an investment in others in order to build an island for one's self. On this island, self-definition is supported not through learning, discovery, or interpersonal experience, but in the rejection of others and the denial of needing anything from anyone.

**#5: The Empty/Void Identity:** These youths have not been able to locate any vehicle of identity formation including any of the pathways defined in the prior four types (which, in the way I have presented them, essentially amount to "pseudo-identities"). Consequently, the empty/void identity has not found neither an authentic nor a distressed way to form a "self" that one believes in and enacts in the world. Depression, various forms of acting out, excessive video-gaming, and other forms of passivity, distraction, and aimlessness often characterize this child's style of living.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have attempted to describe what I call "the silent epidemic of self-estrangement" among children and adolescents. Features of the digital age, and other significant components of the world today including the predominance of non-relational experience and the diminishment of internal drive

and motivation, seem to coalesce, resulting in a rising demographic of children who have little access to their own emerging identities, emotional experience, and inner lives. Five self-estrangement personality types were described that appear by adolescence; these are "pseudo-identity" formations that simultaneously feign identity and profoundly constrict a more comprehensive involvement with the self, others, and the world. It is imperative that factors impeding the Identity development of our youths in this complex and challenging world be further explored so that sound diagnostic strategies, and effective interventions in the family, school, community and therapeutic contexts, may be developed.

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