

## **The Odd Ducks in the World of Personality**

by Kim A. Dawson

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In Rob Lees' column about narcissistic personality disorder a few weeks ago, he referred to it as the "It's All About Me" disorder. Last week, referring to the anti-social personality disorder, Rob said it can be thought of as the "Watch Out for Me" personality disorder. The focus of this week's article is the schizotypal personality disorder. Because it is identified with peculiar beliefs and social discomfort, it could be called the "Odd Duck" disorder.<sup>1</sup>

One very interesting aspect of the schizotypal personality is that one of the things that point to the diagnosis is belief in the paranormal or "psi" phenomena. These are things that are experienced but cannot be explained by any known law of nature. Let's look more closely at this.

To begin with, several people have experiences they would classify as weird, strange, or unexplainable. Recent surveys have shown that approximately half of Canadians surveyed reported belief in psi phenomena.<sup>2</sup> These phenomena could be called "anomalous" or "psi-related experiences" and have been subjected to scientific scrutiny for over a century. Because of this, some people can relate to TV programs such as *Medium* which is about a bona fide psychic ([www.allisondubois.com](http://www.allisondubois.com)). Many others have suspended their disbelief in the paranormal, super-human kinds of abilities portrayed by the Jedi Knights or Siths in the *Star Wars* trilogy.

Psi-related experiences include reports of apparent telepathy (mind-to-mind communication), clairvoyance (anomalous knowledge of distant events), precognition (knowledge of the future), and of psychokinesis (mind over matter, as illustrated by a Yuri Geller supposedly bending a spoon with his mind). It is interesting to know that while many people pass these off as unreal, dreams, or "works of the devil", those of Latino heritage or First Nations people may more easily accept that some people are capable of knowing the future, communicating with spirits, or healing others with their minds. Indeed, in such cultures, there is a specific role for such healers called "Shamans". While this may not be a perspective that a Western-trained health professional would typically endorse, it remains important that these cultural differences be recognized and respected.

Let's take a personal example. I know someone who had an experience she summarized this way. She said she awoke from a dream and realized "the part of me that is my friend's grandfather is dead." There was no way she had of knowing that this person had died, until she received news that very morning her friend's grandfather had, in fact, died. I think it is unfortunate that the conventional ways of understanding such experiences act as blocks against people who are the bearers of this way of perceiving the world. They may find little empathy from Western acculturated family members, friends, or physicians. This may contribute to the person not seeking help or support. Even more disturbing would be the fear that the precognitive dream was the active cause of (rather than a way to passively observe) the death. Despite the popularity of paranormal beliefs, the fear of having caused a death (without actually intending to do so) could understandably be very disturbing and could be a sign that a mental health issue or personality disorder is developing.

There is quite a marked similarity between these sorts of psi-related experiences and the symptoms of schizotypal personality disorder. There is even evidence that people with schizotypal personality disorder are inclined to agree with paranormal beliefs. Psi believers have been found to need a sense of control over their lives and experience fantasies of unlimited power and success. This

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<sup>1</sup> It could also be termed the "I'm different" disorder.

<sup>2</sup> In one recent survey, 57% reported belief in life-after-death, 6.3% of respondents said they had seen a ghost, 5.8% said an angel, and 4.4% said a witch.

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need for control has been associated with reports of childhood trauma. Mixed with childhood ways of making sense of the world, this may be the basis of magical thinking which characterizes the schizotypal personality. However, the schizotypal personality only affects a very small percentage (about 3%) of people. And just because a person believes in the paranormal doesn't mean they have a personality disorder! Actually, studies of the mental health of psi believers indicate they are doing fine in the areas of psychological adjustment. They don't typically report depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance, or psychosomatic symptoms more than the healthy population.

Who are these odd ducks, then? The authoritative book on mental health disorders (the DSM-IV), describes a person who has Schizotypal Personality Disorder as having a pervasive pattern of cognitive and perceptual distortions (such as seeing things or hearing voices). Such people may speak strangely, use unusual or made-up words, and be overly suspicious or paranoid. Their ability to relate to others is often compromised and they often have social anxiety. As already indicated, they may also have superstitions or other beliefs in the paranormal. But because of the good mental health of most psi believers, I don't think paranormal belief is a very useful criterion for a mental disorder.

The "schizoid" personality is another "Odd Duck" disorder. (Yes, they may look alike and are spelled almost the same, but they are different!) They both tend to have very few confidants or friends, except perhaps a close family member. They interact with others if they have to but prefer to keep to themselves because they feel very different from others and just don't "fit in." As a result, both schizoid and schizotypal personalities appear to be "loners." They may be found in occupations that allow them to work in an isolated setting, such as lighthouse operator, computer games tester, or psychic. They may seem emotionally cold or detached from those around them. While a schizoid personality would probably not even be interested in going to a dinner party, the person who is schizotypal would go, would see dead people around the table, and would become more tense and suspicious over the course of the evening.

As in past *Perspectives* on mental health issues, it can be difficult to sort out what's what. For example, both schizoid and schizotypal personality disorders have an increased likelihood of a family history of schizophrenia. Likewise, the social isolation of these personality disorders may lead to psychosis, drug use, or major depression. While their peculiarities are so in-grained and typically not very disturbing to themselves, it would be sadness, anxiety, or drug dependence they would be more likely to drive these "odd ducks" to seek treatment.

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