

# American Journal of Psychology and Brain Studies

<https://urfpublishers.com/journal/american-psychology>

Vol: 2 & Iss: 2

## The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness

Laing RD\*

**Citation:** Laing RD. The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness. *Am J Psychol & Brain Stud*, 2025;2(2):99-100.

**Received:** 04 June, 2025; **Accepted:** 10 June, 2025; **Published:** 11 June, 2025

**\*Corresponding author:** Laing RD, Penguin, UK

Copyright: © 2025 Laing RD., This is an open-access article published in *Am J Psychol & Brain Stud* and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

### ABSTRACT

R. D. Laing in his book *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* uses the method of existential phenomenology to redefine and interpret the conception of schizophrenia in a unique and a different way and also tries to redefine the schizoid conditions that a patient undergoes. The author Laing rejects scientific psychiatric assessments of mental conditions because he asserts that schizophrenic symptoms stem from an inner conflict regarding genuine self-expression. Laing uses specific real-life examples of patients in his book to display and demonstrate that how psychosis drives individuals toward self-separation before they need to build false personality designs to handle their existential mental battles. Laing disputes psychiatric treatment methods in clinical settings because he believes patients require a more meaningful analysis of their mental distress. The purpose of the manuscript is to do a book review of the book “*The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*” written by R.D. Laing. The method to write the book review was conceptual, analytical and an interpretative. Finally, the summary of the findings are the following: genuine experiences that a patient has undergone in his or her life provide more clarity and a deeper knowledge as to the actual dilemma that a particular patient is in, which is not possible to get to know through standardized methods to diagnose mental illnesses in patients. Psychiatric symptoms resulting from existential distress should not be diagnosed as biological medical conditions and further tries to stress on the point that psychiatric treatment needs to emphasize empathy over formal diagnostic protocols.

**Keywords:** Existential psychiatry; Schizophrenia; Ontological insecurity; False-self system; Phenomenology of madness

### Introduction

The book “*Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*” by R. D. Laing tries to perform a psychological examination of schizoid and schizophrenic patients through an existential-phenomenological method. The contents in the book are organized into three sections - the first section which examine existential psychological elements, the second section which examines the mechanisms behind self-splitting and the third section of the book dealing with how schizophrenia progresses and its stages. Laing advocates connecting and knowing about the genuine feelings of persons with mental illness as the primary diagnostic basis of mental illness rather than using standardized measurement methods to diagnose the conditions of a patient because he believes that the genuine experiences that a patient

has undergone in his or her life provide more clarity and a deeper knowledge as to the actual dilemma that a particular patient is in, which is not possible to get to know through standardized methods to diagnose mental illnesses in patients emotional welfare.

### Existential realities of schizoid conditions

Laing further argues that the schizoid human experiences form the focus of the second portion in the book. Laing describes two forms of selfhood in his perspective: physical existence and mental constructs while explaining that how separate aspects of the self of an individual helps him or her to face existential anxieties of life such as the inevitability of death, loss of meaning and the uncertainty of existence. According to Laing,

the fundamental element of his writings people create artificial personas known as false-self systems to conduct interactions with others and further he argues that it is these psychological defence mechanisms that a person uses to conduct interactions with the people around him or her that creates increasing gap between the genuine authentic identity that an individual has and the false self that the person shows to the world to deal with it. Laing shows through his descriptions in the book that schizoid people suffer from inner conflicts between preserving self-completeness and keeping up a social appearance. This dichotomy between preserving self-completeness and at the same time trying to keep up a social appearance creates a divided personality where the internal systems of thought, feelings, emotions and behaviour in a person are always in disharmony and never in harmony.

### **The development of psychosis**

The final section of the book traces the progression from schizoid defences to full-blown schizophrenia. Laing shows that severe dissociation makes people shift between powerful feelings of non-existence and absolute power. He believes that the psychiatric symptoms resulting from existential distress should not be diagnosed as biological medical conditions and further tries to stress on the point that psychiatric treatment needs to emphasize empathy over formal diagnostic protocols<sup>1</sup>.

### **Criticism and influence**

The existential approach presented in book is important but also faces criticism from the scholars of the psychiatric community. The rejection by Laing of medical language and his use of existential analysis creates obstacles for practitioners who work within traditional psychiatric systems. The scholars criticize his perspective because it fails to address biological schizophrenia research which decreases its usefulness for current psychiatric discussion.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although extremely useful for understanding schizophrenia from an existential perspective the work demonstrates certain important constraints which are: Firstly, Laing almost completely eliminates biological schizophrenia models from his theory which makes his work incompatible with present-day psychiatric theories. Secondly, the detailed philosophical structure of the text creates difficulty for some readers when they attempt the sort of interpretation needed to understand existential phenomenology. Lastly, Laing's reliance on qualitative case studies is valuable for exploring subjective experiences, but the qualitative case studies for exploring subjective experiences limits the generalizability of the claims made by Laing in his book.

## **Conclusion**

Lastly, it can be said that the book "The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness" by R.D. Laing established its position as an important source for the theory of mental illness by delivering and giving descriptions of non-reductionist explorations of psychotic conditions. Laing's existential approach fosters a compassionate understanding of schizophrenia and challenges conventional diagnostic frameworks. Although it has its restrictions, the book can serve as a good source for the students of psychology, psychiatry and philosophy as well as individuals who are interested to study and analyse the intricate dimensions of human experience from an existential perspective.

## **Reference**

1. Laing R, David AS. The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness. Penguin, UK 2010.