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Basic sense of self in youth at high risk for developing Schizophrenia

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Phenomenological researchers argue that schizophrenia is first and foremost a disorder of the basic sense of self, that is, of the immediate, pre-reflective, embodied sense of being immersed in the world. According to the self-disorder model, impairment of the basic sense of self precedes clinical symptoms and is independent of them. Therefore, we postulated that youth at high psychometric risk for developing schizophrenia would present an impairment in their basic sense of self, as measured by levels of ego strength, basic symptoms, and pronoun usage. Eighty undergraduate students aged 19–22 years ($M=20.83$ years, $SD=1.28$ years) completed the schizotypal personality questionnaire, ego strengths questionnaire, a self-report version of schizophrenia proneness instrument, and four written narratives about personal and fictional experiences. Based on the SPQ scores, participants were allocated to either control or study group. Compared to the control group, the high-risk group presented lower levels of ego strength, higher levels of basic symptoms, and used more personal pronouns and the, they pronoun in narratives. Self-report on the SPI-A and ESQ correlated significantly with the objective lexical pattern of pronoun use: lower ego strength correlated with greater use of they and more self-reported basic symptoms correlated with greater use of pronouns overall, personal pronouns, and the pronouns she and they. Ego strength had the most predictive power for group membership. Consistent with the self-disorder model of schizophrenia, youth at high psychometric risk for schizophrenia present a somewhat diminished sense of basic self that is evident in both self-report and objective measures..

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