

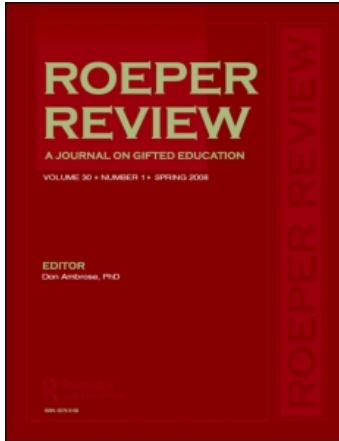
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Aspects of the Gifted Self

A Kaleidoscopic View: Reflections on the Creative Self

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Human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them...Life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves.

—Gabriel Garcia Marquez

The self is an abstract human creation, a construct which refers to a variety of characteristics, traits, emotions, and mental processes that may or may not be communicated through speech, physical actions, or other expressive behaviors (Hewitt, 1994). The self is both coherent and consistent in its essential properties as well as flexible and adaptive - both within the environment and across the lifespan. The self is not static, but is dynamic and responsive to both contextual and temporal influences (Ornstein, 1995). The self is developmental and evolving and, by its very conception, creative.

Particularly creative people are recognized most often by their creative accomplishments within a particular field or domain, but creative individuals do not just create external things. They also live creatively and in many ways create their own selves. The creative personality purposefully seeks out experiences and ideas which promote psychological growth and expansion. The creative person lives between the extremes of a number of dialectics, and the creative personality represents a multidimensional organization of what might at first glance appear to be an assortment of contradictory traits and states. It is the ability to synthesize and maintain a unified self given these extremes that separates the creative from the both the average and the dysfunctional.

In this article, conceptions and descriptions of the human construct of the self are presented along with characteristics and descriptors of creative individuals. The interaction of these characteristics and the creative tension produced by the coexistence of seemingly disparate pairs of these traits are discussed, and a view of the dialectical nature and the extremity of the creative personality leads into a discussion of bipolar mood disorder and its implications for the optimal functioning of the creative personality. Finally, the creative self is addressed in terms of both cognitive and emotional complexity.

The Self: Described, Not Defined

We have invented our selves. The self is not directly observable. It is not the biological package of water, proteins, carbon and other molecular combinations which comprise our physical structure. Nor is it the combination of physical attributes which constitute our external presentation.

Self is explained in the dictionary by several definitions, followed by nearly three pages of various self-attributes (e.g., self-conscious, self-centered, self-esteem, self-aware). Much that is written about the self in psychological literature addresses issues related to self-concept and mental representations of our selves. How we perceive ourselves, it seems, is central to our outlook and overall functioning in the world (Harter, 1989).

This self-perception is greatly subjective and personal. It may be communicated to another through some form of shared, socially-constructed, symbolic representation - through dialogue or writing, a psychological self-report measure, or perhaps an artistic medium such as painting, photography, dance, sculpture, or music. However, the self of another may not be directly experienced or observed. It may only be understood by way of such descriptive means and shared communication, through one's behavior and both verbal and nonverbal expression (Hewitt, 1994). As a general concept, the self may be defined specifically. In terms of the individual, however, the self refers to numerous personological traits and characteristics that vary from individual to individual. While these characteristics may be described in great detail, they defy precise measure and absolute definition.

The Differentiated Self: Unique, Unified, and Constant

Every facet of the universe, each man, woman, child, each plant and animal, the clouds and heavenly bodies, the wind and the sand and the stars, each object, each space, even bits of gravel and broken stone, each item of nature, contains its own particular identity, its own unique form, its own special existence. Every aspect of nature and life contains its own spark of originality that attains a living unity and persistence of form through its relation to other identities and forms.

—Clark Moustakas

Two themes are predominant in the psychological and philosophical literature on the self: *unity* and *consistency*. The self possesses unity in that the experiencing individual is reflexively aware of only one identity. Although we may speak of a *true self* or a *false self*, such references are generally used metaphorically to describe various aspects of a unified self (Harter, 1989). The unity of the self as experienced by the individual will only fragment in the case of multiple personality disorders and related disassociation (Dowd, 1989).

The self is consistent in that individuals seem to themselves and appear to others to be the same person across situations and over time. It is assumed that individuals will behave with reasonable uniformity in a variety of situations and settings. While someone may speak of *not being myself today*,

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this is taken as a metaphorical representation of a feeling state rather than a true and or radical alteration of the individual's self-structure.

Also central to the concept of self is its self-reflective nature and capacity for deliberate change. Only through self-reflection may we arrive at self-awareness, which includes the capability to rearrange and improve an unsatisfactory self-identity. This tendency toward self-reflection and examination appears to be a uniquely human capacity.

This unique human capacity for self-reflection leads to a bevy of other unique human activities. *We can name ourselves, think about ourselves, talk to ourselves, imagine ourselves acting in various ways, love or hate ourselves, feel proud or ashamed; in short, we can act toward ourselves in all the ways we can act toward others* (Hewitt, p. 11). In so doing we can make choices about what we think and do, effect change in the course of our own lives, and shape our own development and personality. Through self-consciousness, we may act toward ourselves with purpose much as we act toward the external world with purpose. We may shape our very selves even as we shape our environments. Living one's life can be a highly creative act; molding one's self may be the ultimate creative act.

Intensity, Transformation and Development of the Creative Self

Psychic creation, including the creation of the self, is a form of evolution.

—Frank Barron

Numerous individuals in the fields of psychology and gifted education have studied the mental health and developmental potential of intellectually, creatively, and artistically gifted individuals (Piechowski, 1997). Aware that highly creative individuals tend to live more intensely, Dabrowski (1967, 1972) viewed this sensitivity and emotional intensity as an integral part of their psychological development. In the intensified feeling, thinking, and imagining of these persons, Dabrowski found great potential for unusually high levels of psychological growth and individual development. Dabrowski identified five areas of potential overexcitability - psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional - through which individuals might more intensely experience and respond to both the external environment and the internal terrain of the psyche. This psychic intensity and sensitivity to the environment may lead to tensions which overwhelm the individual. These tensions may contribute to the disintegration and ultimate reintegration of an individual's personality structure. The new integration significantly impacts the person's subsequent internal life, relationships with others, work and creative activities, and continued personal growth and development.

Aaron Copeland's statement suggests aspects of the intensity, drive, transformational and developmental potential experienced by highly creative individuals (Storr, 1972).

The serious composer who thinks about his art will sooner or later have occasion to ask himself: Why is it so important to my own psyche that I compose music? What makes it seem so absolutely necessary, so that every other daily activity, by comparison, is of lesser significance? And why is the creative impulse never satisfied; why must one always begin anew? To the first question - the need to create - the answer is always the same - self-expression; the basic need to make evident one's deepest feelings about life. But why is the job never done? Why must one always begin again? The reason for the com-

pulsion to renewed creativity, it seems to me, is that each added work brings with it an element of self-discovery. I must create in order to know myself, and since self-knowledge is a never-ending search, each new work is only a part-answer to the question "Who am I?" and brings with it the need to go on to other and different part-answers. (p. 223)

In this sense, we all must create in some sense in order to know ourselves, and we are all composers in terms of our own lives (Bateson, 1990).

Dabrowski constructed a theory of personality development which focused on inner growth and the split between *what is*, the immediate state of one's self, and *what ought to be*, the press toward higher states of development. It is this call to an ideal higher state which, when intensely experienced, provokes further growth and inner transformation. These intensities and the related press for inner transformation provide the foundational process for creating a higher-level self (Assagioli, 1965; Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Piechowski, 1974, 1993). While such transformation and creative growth might seem sudden, closer investigation indicates that the process is lengthy, complex, and involves a unique interaction and "co-incidence" (Feldman, 1989) of a number of states, traits, relationships, and activities.

Complexity: Characteristics of the Creative Self

While each human being is unique and distinct, investigations of creative lives have indicated that creative people in varying degrees tend to be (or have) the following twelve characteristics (Daniels, 1997; Davis, 1992): self-aware regarding their own creativity; independent; risk taking; energetic; curious; sense of humor; perceptive; artistic; original/imaginative; need for privacy/alone time; open-minded; and attracted to complexity/novelty.

Creative individuals tend to be *aware of their own creative abilities*, and this self-awareness often leads to a heightened awareness of the creativity of others. The self-reflection and metacognitive understanding of creativity appears to be self-reinforcing; a certain creativity consciousness - receptivity to and valuing of creative ideas and innovations - seems to underlie and support each individual's creative potential.

Creative individuals tend to be *independent*. The creative individual must be ready and willing to make waves, to go against the crowd, and at times to stand alone. Independence can manifest itself in a variety of ways: by standing apart from one's peers in viewpoint, appearance, activity, and a host of other personal choices.

Creative individuals *take risks*: intellectual, social, psychological, and emotional risks. Whenever a unique approach of opinion is ventured, the creative individual risks rejection and isolation. Some adventurous creative individuals will be inclined to take physical risks as well (e.g. Orville and Wilbur Wright).

It is not surprising that driving absorption, passionate interest, intense dedication, and unwilling to give up are all phrases used to describe the *energy*, perseverance, commitment, and motivation of highly creative individuals. Such energy and drive are often evidenced in early childhood and maintained throughout adulthood.

Along with creative inclinations come *curiosity* and questioning. The creative impulse inclines one toward exploration, investigation, and diverse pursuit of possibilities. *What next? How does this work? How might this be done differently? What can I do to make a positive change?* are considerations

that often compel the curious and creative to understand, to interact with, and to effect change on aspects of their environment as well as their own selves.

Humor is associated with an ability to approach problems and life in general in a fresh, childlike, and playful manner. Humor in the form of puns, satire, and farce engages the imagination in approaching a problem with an unusual twist. A unique juxtaposition of entities, ideas, words and images often lends a humorous note to a creative activity. The inventions and creations of numerous eminent individuals have resulted from fooling around with ideas and playing with possibilities, in contrast to more rule-bound approaches (Davis & Rimm, 1989).

Creative individuals tend to be highly **perceptive**. They are more sensitive to identifying patterns, discerning details, and noticing similarities and distinctions among seemingly disparate entities, items or ideas (Daniels-McGhee & Davis; 1994; Torrance, 1962). Heightened sensory awareness coupled with both a well-developed intuitive capacity and the ability to apprehend multiple layers of meaning allows the perceptively gifted to assess people and situations rapidly (Piechowski, 1997). Such heightened awareness also enables the creative individual to see past the obvious and, in noting fine points, to see possibilities where others may not.

Creative individuals tend to be **artistic**, if not in a productive way, at least in an aesthetic sense. Creative artists (Csikszentmihalyi & Getzels, 1973; Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1968, 1976) and scientists alike tend to value a personal sense of aesthetics and elegance over commercial reward or public recognition.

Creative individuals tend to fantasize, daydream, and *imagine* to a greater extent than less creative peers. Imagery plays a key role in the thinking and conceptualizing of the creative individual (Daniels, 1995). Creative individuals employ more purposeful forms of mental imagery in their everyday thinking and problem solving. They tend to have greater control of their mental representations, as well as the external form in which they find expression, resulting in greater originality in thought, process, and product (Flowers & Garbin, 1989).

Numerous creators in varied fields have reported a need for extended periods of **privacy** and **solitude** for nurturing and exploring creative ideas (e.g., Gardner, 1993; Storr, 1988). Graham Wallas' (1926) analysis of the creative process included four stages: **preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification**. Incubation is perhaps the hallmark of the Wallas model. Incubation is a period during which the creative activity, project, or problem is, deliberately or incidentally, put out of one's mind. Incubation is a period of pre-conscious, fringe-conscious, or unconscious processing during which one is not giving the creative project deliberate attention; instead, one is involved in another activity, such as jogging, resting, reading, walking in the woods, or possibly even sleeping. It is after such periods of relaxation and reflection that the "Aha!" or "Eureka!" associated with the illumination in the creative process often occurs. Such processes generally do not evolve in periods or environments of high levels of interpersonal interaction (Storr, 1988). On the contrary, creative individuals place considerable value on the inner life of their mind, their imagination, and the relationship of reflection and contemplation to creative pursuits.

Creative people are **open-minded**, willing to consider multiple possibilities, and able to tolerate ambiguity while exploring an idea. Open-mindedness, while not requiring a complete rejection of convention, approaches what is as a starting point for what might be.

Creativity is not a straight-forward, simple concept or process. Creative enterprises tend to bridge disciplines, styles, techniques, cultures, geography, and periods. Creative people themselves tend to be drawn to **complexity**, preferring environments that are rich and varied in resources, materials, and modes of interaction.

The Dialectical Self

Creative people exhibit combined tendencies of thought and activity that in most people are segregated. Their identities contain contradictory extremes - rather than thinking of a creative person as an individual, one must consider each creative person as a multitude. Just as the color white includes all the hues in the spectrum, creative people have the capacity to integrate an extremely wide range of human possibilities within themselves (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

While seemingly disparate qualities may be present to some degree in each of us, we generally are conditioned to develop only one end of a dialectical or bipolar trait. For example, one might grow up cultivating the introspective, reflective side of our nature and loathe or repress the gregarious, effusive side. A creative individual is more likely to be both introspective and effusive, either at the same time or at different times, rather than one or the other exclusively. Having the complex personality of a creative individual means having the capacity to express virtually the full range of traits possible in the human repertoire.

A complex personality is not one that is neutral or average, nor may it be located on a continuum at some point between two extremes. A complex personality, far from being middle-of-the road or uncommitted to one direction or another, rather involves the ability to move from one extreme to the other as the situation warrants.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) illustrated the complexity of the creative individual with ten pairs of apparently antithetical traits that often are simultaneously present in creative personality structures. Many are related to and describe interactions between pairs of the 12 traits noted earlier (Daniels, 1997; Davis, 1992).

- Creative individuals have a great deal of physical energy, but they are often quiet and at rest (p. 58).
- Creative individuals tend to be smart, yet also naive at the same time.
- Another way of expressing this dialectic is by the contrasting poles of wisdom and childishness (p. 59).
- A third paradoxical trait refers to the related combination of playfulness and discipline, or responsibility (p. 61).
- Creative individuals alternate between imagination and fantasy at one end, and a rooted sense of reality at the other. Both are needed to break away from the present without losing touch with the past (p. 63).
- Creative people seem to harbor opposite tendencies on the continuum between extroversion and introversion (p. 65).
- Creative individuals are remarkably humble and proud at the same time (p. 68).
- Creative individuals tend to escape rigid gender role stereotyping, aspects of traditional "masculine" and "feminine" traits are evident in the psychological make-up of both male and female creative individuals (p. 70).
- Generally, creative people are thought to be rebellious and independent, yet they are generally well-versed in tradition and work from the traditional to extend into new terrain (p. 71).
- Most creative persons are very passionate about their work, yet they can be extremely objective about it as well (p. 72).

- Finally, the openness and sensitivity of creative individuals often exposes them to suffering and pain yet also a great deal of enjoyment (p. 73).

Another pair which contributes to the dialectical tension of the creative individual might also be considered – that of similar and different. Creative individuals are similar to others in numerous ways – including basic biology and, to a great extent, developmental trajectory. However, as we have seen, there also are numerous ways – and combinations of ways – in which the creative individual is unusual.

The Kaleidoscopic Self: Dialectical Personality Traits or Bipolar Mood Disorder?

Men have called me mad, but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence – whether much that is glorious – whether all that is profound – does not spring from disease of thought – from moods of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect.

–Edgar Allan Poe

Two other pairs of traits – conditions, really – have been associated with creative lives: genius/insanity and mania/depression (Jamison, 1993). In fact, a number of highly creative individuals (e.g., Alfred, Lord Tennyson; William Blake; Lord Byron) wrote of the extreme mood swings they experienced throughout their lives. Also, a number of poets, composers, and painters were hospitalized for either mania or depression at some point in their lives. Vincent van Gogh, Sylvia Plath, Georgia O’Keefe, and Robert Schumann are but just a few of those who suffered from one of the major mood disorders, either major depression or manic-depressive illness, also known as bipolar mood disorder. Major depression is manifested in intense melancholic spells, but the bipolar nature of manic-depression brings moods at both extremes, pitching individuals from states of profound sadness to heightened and extreme levels of energy, activity, and euphoria.

Kay Redfield Jamison (1993), a professor of psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, brought together both biographical and clinical data from her study of creative individuals in search of possible answers to this question: Could such disruptive diseases potentially convey certain creative advantages? This notion seems counter-intuitive; most manic-depressives are not extraordinarily imaginative and most individuals of creative accomplishment do not suffer from severe mood swings. To suggest that bipolar disorder accounts for artistic or creative talent would falsely support and potentially aggrandize the notion of the mad genius.

Yet, Jamison’s (1993) data indicates that a significantly greater percentage of creative persons experience the extremes – the depths and the highs – associated with major depression or bipolar mood disorder. While 1 percent of the general population suffer from bipolar disorder and 5 percent from a major depression, also known as unipolar disorder, creative individuals – artists and writers in particular – suffer 8-10 times the rate of depression and 10-20 times the rate of bipolar mood disorder. Major depression, alone or as part of a bipolar disorder, brings with it states of apathy, lethargy, hopelessness, slowed or otherwise impaired thinking, and a loss of pleasure in what were previously enjoyable experiences. In contrast, during periods of mania, bipolar disorder brings with it elevated feeling states. Mania includes increased energy, feelings of heightened self-confidence and self-esteem, notions of grandiosity, excitability, exhilaration, and decreased need for sleep.

While the extremes of bipolar disorder are potentially lethal and must not be trivialized or romanticized, it seems that the ruminations of low level depression coupled with the increased alertness and energy of hypomania (mild mania) may contribute positively to the creative ideation and productivity of certain creative individuals. Hypomania and its related states, in particular, may be conducive to original thinking, unusual creativity, and increased productivity. Certain cognitive styles associated with hypomania – expansive thought and idealized perspective – may contribute to increased fluency and flexibility of thinking. Certain noncognitive aspects of manic-depression may also contribute to a creative life: less need for sleep, bold and restless attitudes, and the capacity for experiencing both profound depth and variety of emotions. The manic-depressive temperament is on a very fundamental, biological level an alert and sensitive system with the ability to respond rapidly and firmly.

Kay Redfield Jamison (1995) used the following metaphor to describe these capacities for responding to the world with a wide range of emotional, perceptual, intellectual, behavioral and energy states: *in a sense, depression is a view of the world through a dark glass, and mania is that seen through a kaleidoscope – often brilliant, but fractured* (p. 67). These extremes are indeed dysfunctional and problematic but moving out toward and between the extremes can provide entirely new and productively different perspectives. While the depressed individual is stuck with dark glasses, the manic individual does not see beyond the fractured pieces to apprehend the design as a whole, and many others seek clarity of view – the ability to see what is accurately and clearly, the creative individual seeks a variety of perspectives and has the ability and the desire to cultivate a flexible perspective, as if through a variety of lenses.

In keeping with the kaleidoscopic metaphor, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; the fractured pieces are not the emphasis, but the potential for a striking, distinct, and unified design. Similarly, the creative self, while composed of a multitude of seemingly disparate qualities, is not broken but unified within a complex pattern and design, richly colored and textured, whole and connected as well as flexible, responsive to change, and with great capacity for reorganization.

The Inventive Self: Creating the Self, Creatively

What is a poet?..He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them.

–William Wordsworth

Each individual is in some way unique, but it is the degree, the particular combination of traits and abilities, the creative self-consciousness and self-reflectiveness of the creative individual that is central to the creative self. While many seek to go along (Moustakas, 1967), the creative individual purposefully seeks to cultivate the unique and to both elaborate upon and to extend dialectical aspects of the self. In this way, not only is the creative individual creative within and toward a domain: art, science, poetry, dance and so on; the cre-

ative individual may be deliberately creative and inventive with his or her own self.

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Denial of Anger/Denial of Self: Dealing with the Dilemmas

Ellen D. Fiedler

This evocative essay explores the relationship between denial of anger and denial of Self in light of two aspects of Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration: the Levels of Emotional Development and the Overexcitabilities. It suggests that issues for gifted children are exacerbated by their emotional intensity and discusses dilemmas confronted by gifted children who are faced with resolving disparities between their idealism and their experience of anger. The search for Self of a gifted individual grappling with issues of denial of anger is illustrated by a poem describing inner turmoil and efforts to achieve resolution. In addition, the article offers examples of strategies that might enable gifted children's expression of overexcitabilities to help them move toward fuller development of Self in relationship to dealing with anger. A number of questions pertinent to the topic are also raised.

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For a gifted individual who lives with the everyday implications of emotional intensity, dealing with anger may not be a simple matter. One such person described her feelings to her counselor by saying that she was afraid that if she ever unleashed her anger that it would defoliate everything within a 50-mile radius. His response was, "Wow! Are you powerful!" Certainly, she had never considered this feeling from the perspective of personal power, let alone as a manifestation of denial of her Self.

What does it take for someone to express anger? What are the implications regarding the Self in relationship to denial of anger? Does denial of anger diminish one's sense of Self or does denial of Self lead to denial of anger? This article is offered as an evocative essay — an opportunity to consider the relationship between denial of anger and denial of Self in light of several aspects of Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration (Dabrowski, 1964; Silver-

man, 1993). It is intended to be thought-provoking and to provide a catalyst for reflecting on some of the possible connections being suggested.

Gifted children who have issues with feeling and/or expressing anger may have multifaceted concerns. Some of them may believe that anger is uncontrollable, dangerous and primarily destructive. Because of their sensitivity and capacity for empathy as manifestations of emotional overexcitability (Silverman, 1993), children who are gifted may be well aware of the pain that others feel as the result of being the target of anyone's anger. Therefore, even if they are merely observers when one person is expressing anger to another, the pain for a gifted child may be acute, resulting in those children vowing to "hold their tongues", "keep their mouths shut", and never, ever, say anything in anger to anyone.

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