

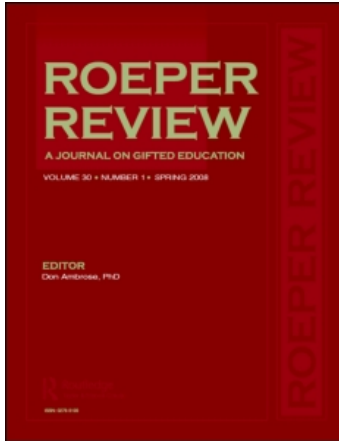
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Denial of anger/denial of self: *Dealing with the dilemmas*

Ellen D. Fiedler^a

^a Professor in the Master of Arts degree program in Gifted Education, Northwestern Illinois University,

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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.

Ellen D. Fiedler is a professor in the Master of Arts degree program in Gifted Education at Northwestern Illinois University and former Chair of the Counseling and Guidance Division of the National Association for Gifted Children.

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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Little by little, these children may gradually lose their sense of Self, abdicating it in favor of “peace at any price”, because they believe that this is far more desirable than the ramifications of angry confrontation. From the perspective of a gifted child who may be well aware of instances when anger has gotten out of control, resulting in either physical or psychological harm, such “unmanageable” feelings are terrifying. Therefore, such highly-sensitive children may decide that the only viable route for them is to suppress and repress their anger. Typically, this is experienced physiologically in what has been described as the fight or flight reaction. What begins as self-control for the gifted child may become the foundation for Self-denial, rooted in fear.

However, emotional intensity also relates to how deeply gifted children experience all of their feelings, including anger. Therefore, the gifted child may feel anger as if it were a volcano about to erupt. When the explosions do come, their magnitude often seems out of proportion to the situation to the gifted children themselves as well as to others around them. Also, because gifted children are so adept at using their brain power to deal with whatever challenges they have encountered, they often resort to intellectualizing rather than dealing with authentic emotional responses. Their previously tried-and-true methods of using logic and rational thought can only provide stop-gap measures in an attempt to handle intensely-emotional circumstances. Therefore, gifted children’s anger may be further fueled by frustration and feelings of powerlessness and a sense of incompetence.

Another concern that many gifted children may have about anger is due to the inner conflict that comes directly as a result of their idealism. Believing that anger is a reflection of negativity and judgmental thinking, gifted children may reject anger out of a desire to be open-minded thinkers who are invariably positive and accepting of others. Anger may seem to be diametrically opposed to their deeply-held convictions about the intrinsic worth of all human beings and the high standards that these children set for themselves in terms of how they believe they should relate to others. Therefore, when they have strong feelings of outrage aroused by either real or supposed wrong-doing, these emotions are compounded by a sense that they should not be feeling this way — i.e., that they should be able to

maintain their tranquility at all times and harbor only loving thoughts, kindness and compassion in their hearts.

A brief look at Dabrowski’s Theory of Positive Disintegration may shed some light on what the gifted individual is experiencing under these circumstances. More and more educators of the gifted have become interested in Dabrowski’s theory and how the work of the Polish psychologist and psychiatrist might relate to gifted children and their development. By using Dabrowski’s theory as a lens through which gifted children’s life experiences may be viewed, those who work with them can have more empathy and be more effective (Fiedler, 1997).

Dabrowski’s Theory of Positive Disintegration includes two components that are relevant to the questions being raised here about denial of anger in rela-

tionship to denial of Self. The Levels of Emotional Development described by Dabrowski’s Theory (see Figure 1) suggest a single-minded focus on self-serving interests at Level I, moving upward through the relativism of Level II and on to Level III, characterized by intense concern about inconsistencies between actions and values. Resolution of “Spontaneous Multi-level Disintegration” (Piechowski, p. 374) and the inner conflicts inherent in Level III actually allows the individual to move beyond to Level IV and, potentially, to Level V, actualization of the personality ideal. (Fiedler, 1997)

In Dabrowskian terms, agonizing over discrepancies between what is and what should be is indicative of an individual who is at Level III of emotional development — a person who has a “sense of the ideal, but not reaching it; a

Levels of Emotional Development According to Dabrowski’s Theory of Positive Disintegration

Level V: Secondary Integration.

The struggle for self-mastery has been won. Inner conflicts regarding the self have been resolved through actualization of the personality ideal. Disintegration has been transcended by the integration of one’s values into one’s living and being. The life is lived in service to humanity. It is lived according to the highest, most universal principles of loving—compassionate regard for the worth of every individual.

A magnetic field in the soul— Dag Hammarskjöld

Level IV: Organized Multilevel Disintegration.

Individuals are well on the road to self-actualization. They have found a way to reach their own ideals, and they are effective leaders in society. They show high levels of responsibility, authenticity, reflective judgement, empathy for others, autonomy of thought and action, self-awareness, and other attributes associated with self-actualization.

Behind tranquility lies conquered unhappiness— Eleanor Roosevelt

Level III: Spontaneous Multilevel Disintegration.

Multilevelness arises. The person develops a hierarchical sense of values. Inner conflict is vertical, a struggle to bring up one’s behavior to higher standards. There is a dissatisfaction with what one is, because of a competing sense of what one could and ought to be (personality ideal). This internal struggle between higher and lower can be accompanied by existential despair: Anxiety, depression, and feelings of dissatisfaction with the self (inferiority, disquietude, astonishment).

Video meliora proboque deteriora sequor— Marcus Tullius Cicero

Level II: Unilevel disintegration.

Individuals are influenced primarily by their social group and by mainstream values, or they are moral relativists for whom “anything goes,” morally speaking. They often exhibit ambivalent feelings and indecisive flip-flop behavior because they have no clear-cut set of self-determined internal values. Inner conflicts are horizontal, a contest between equal, competing values.

A reed shaken in the wind— Matthew, XI, 7

Level I: Primary Integration.

Egocentrism prevails. A person at this level lacks the capacity for empathy and self-examination. When things go wrong, someone else is always to blame; self-responsibility is not encountered here. With nothing within to inhibit personal ambition, individuals at Level I often attain power in society by ruthless means.

Dog-eat-dog mentality

“I regard the better but follow the worse.”

(Piechowski, 1997, p. 374)

Source: Piechowski, M. M. (1997). Emotional giftedness: The measure of intrapersonal intelligence. In N. Colangelo and G. A. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of gifted education (2nd ed.)* (pp. 366-381). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Figure 1

ANGER!!!

by Ellen Dove Fiedler

<p>ANGRY! ENRAGED! FURIOUS! The vast storehouse Of anger Locked away So long, Now unleashed. I HATE IT!</p> <p>Angry that I'm angry! Furious that I'm furious! Enraged that I'm enraged! How dare I Feel like this?!</p> <p>There is NO REASON; I have no reason. These feelings are Beyond reason; I am being unreasonable!</p> <p>I hate it! I hate feeling like this. I hate HATING (And, yet, That's what I feel.) I keep thinking... (Is that the problem here?) If only I could figure it out— Know WHY I am so angry, (REALLY!) Then, maybe I could stop. (Oh, really???)</p> <p>It's all questions. It's all so questionable. I don't have a right To feel this way! I believe in peace; I believe in love. What is this wellspring Of fury That I've tapped into? I want it to dry up!</p> <p>Murderous thoughts Are murdering me, Murdering My inner peace. Angry words Rage through my brain, Spilling out— I'm out of control. I can't control them; I can't control myself. I hate it! I want to be in control!</p>	<p>Where is the dove Who can always rise Above the illusion? Where's my perspective; Where is my gift For seeing it's All my perceptions? And even though I know that's true, My heart still pounds With rage. Why can't I let it go?</p> <p>Everything That's ever worked To help me cope before Seems far away Or down the tubes; Despair now blends With rage. I try to turn it over, To pray it all away; Still once again It floods my soul.</p> <p>Is this just More of the process? Do I have to do this, too? Feeling pain and sorrow Wasn't enough To do? When do I get To feel joy, A sense of calm within? Traveling through This firestorm Is worse than drowning In pain!</p> <p>I guess I just have to feel it, Whatever "it" may be— To accept whatever Is coming up As another part of me. Is this what they mean By the "shadow"? No wonder I turned My head, Believing so long This wasn't there, Denying myself Instead.</p>	<p>I do NOT like This part of me; I do NOT want to own it. Is it really A part of me? I never thought I was like this! Why do I have To feel this way? It's tearing me apart! My heart aches with Being angry— I want to spread Peace and love.</p> <p>Tell me this will go away! Tell me I will get better. Tell me I'll stop Feeling this way, Tell me I AM much better, Better than A person who hates, A person who says Hateful things. Tell me I'm still The light of the world, That I'm really Above these things.</p> <p>I know this anger Doesn't help, Won't work To make things better. I even know it Makes things worse For me, above all others. It doesn't contribute Anything good, So why can't I let it go? Will I ever be able to? (And, do I need to know?)</p> <p>I guess I just need To feel it— To let it run its course, To have the faith To believe that I can Learn what I need to learn. To find out that Control is simply Another illusion of mine, To know it WILL All come out okay If I'm willing to take the time.</p> <p>If I'm willing To have the courage To look my dark side In the face, Step forward each day And see what is there And be kind enough To forgive Even myself When I hate</p>
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Figure 2

person who has moral concerns: higher versus lower in oneself" (Piechowski, 1991, p. 294). Ironically, it is this very process of questioning the disparity between lofty goals (such as serenity) and the immediacy of intense anger that has the potential of allowing the individual

's inner Self to develop. However, if anger is denied rather than acknowledged and confronted, the Self may become atrophied and its growth may be stunted. Furthermore, if the Self has been repeatedly denied, it will be difficult, if not impossible for the individual

to recognize or deal with anger.

At Level III, individuals who are attempting to come to grips with their anger often travel a rough and rocky road, as reflected in the poem in Figure 2. And yet, as the poem reveals, the willingness to undertake the journey carries within it the potential for the individual to move toward resolution and, ultimately, acceptance of Self.

Gifted children need opportunities to resolve the difficulties that they experience in relationship to issues of denial of anger and denial of Self. Because the interactions between these issues create a vicious cycle, strategies must be found to break that cycle and establish conditions that will enhance the development of Self for each individual. The seeds of such potentially-productive approaches may also be found through application of Dabrowski's Theory, beginning with recognition of the issues and validation for the inner experience of the gifted child.

Since the affective development of those who are gifted differs from that of others, characteristics such as emotional intensity, sensitivity to expectations and feelings, lofty goals and standards for themselves and others, and concerns about the problems of society are common among gifted and talented children (Fiedler, 1997). Methods can be developed to accept and honor the intensity that the children possess in any or all of the areas of overexcitability described by the second component of Dabrowski's Theory: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, and imaginal, as well as emotional overexcitabilities (Silverman, 1993).

Wherever a high degree of intensity is found, that itself can become a tool for dealing with anger as a means toward full development of Self. For instance, imaginal overexcitability can be brought into play to help children work through their anger via creative expression, and psychomotor overexcitability might be used by children to find healthy physical outlets for their anger. In terms of sensual overexcitability, children might be guided in identifying beneficial ways that sensory or aesthetic pleasures can be used to deal with anger, and intellectual overexcitability can help the children develop Self-understanding as they begin to understand the complexity of their emotions.

A very wise woman once said that the problem with education today is that children are often seen as little zippered pouches for teachers to stuff as much stuff into as possible, when the teacher's

DABROWSKI'S THEORY OF POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION

Forms and Expressions of Psychic Overexcitability

PSYCHOMOTOR

Surplus of energy

Rapid speech, marked enthusiasm, fast games and sports, pressure for action, acting out

Psychomotor expression of emotional tension

Compulsive talking and chattering, impulsive actions, nervous habits (tics, nailbiting), workaholism, acting out, compulsive organizing, competitiveness

SENSUAL

Sensory pleasure

Seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing

Sensual expression of emotional tension

Overeating, sexual overindulgence, buying sprees, wanting to be in the limelight

Aesthetic Pleasures

Appreciation of beautiful objects (gems, jewelry, etc.), writing styles, words

INTELLECTUAL

Probing questions; problem solving; learning

Curiosity, concentration, capacity of sustained intellectual effort, avid reading, detailed planning

Theoretical thinking

Thinking about thinking, analytical thinking, introspection, love of theory and analysis, moral thinking and development of a hierarchy of values, conceptual and intuitive integration

IMAGINATIONAL

Free play of the imagination

Frequent use of image and metaphor, facility for invention and fantasy, facility for detailed visualization, poetic and dramatic perception, animistic and magical thinking

Spontaneous imagery as an expression of emotional tension

Animistic imagery, mixing truth and fiction, elaborate dreams, illusions, detailed visual recall, fears of the unknown, tendency to dramatize

EMOTIONAL

Intensity of feeling

Positive feelings, negative feelings, extremes of emotion, complex emotions and feelings, identification with others' feelings, laughing and crying together

Somatic expressions

Tense stomach, sinking heart, blushing, flushing

Inhibition (timidity, shyness)

Strong affective memory

Fears and anxieties, feelings of guilt

Concern with death, depressive and suicidal moods

Relationship feelings

Emotional ties and attachments, concern for others (empathy), sensitivity in relationships, attachment to animals, difficulty adjusting to new environments, loneliness, conflicts with others over depth of relationship

Feelings toward self

Self-evaluation and self-judgment, feelings of inadequacy and inferiority

Source: Silverman, L. K., Ed. (1993). *Counseling the gifted and talented*. Denver, CO: Love Publishing Co.

Figure 2

job should really be to open the zippers and let whatever is inside come out. If parents, teachers, and counselors are willing to allow all that is within the gifted child to come out, including their anger, then perhaps the Self can be fully revealed, as well.

Are there connections between denial of anger and denial of Self? Do these issues create dilemmas for gifted children that are significantly more compelling and more complex than these issues are for other children? What conclusions can be drawn from considering the inner world of the gifted child in terms of dealing with anger?

What implications do these and related questions have in regard to allowing for the full development of the Self of the gifted child?

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New Jersey Association for Gifted Children

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