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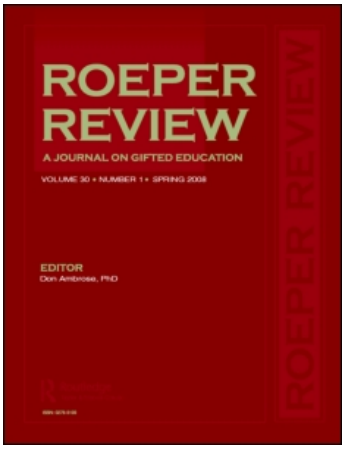

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The gifted self: *Its role in development and emotional health*

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The Gifted Self:
Its Role in Development and Emotional Health

*Thomas S. Greenspon**

This article presents an empathic and introspective account of the development of the self in gifted individuals based on observations over a number of years in therapy and counseling settings. The concept of the self is outlined and several key issues related to the emotional world of gifted people are explored using case vignettes to deepen understanding of the emotional world and of the motivations of the gifted. It is concluded that attention to the self has value both in increasing understanding of giftedness and in providing help for emotional problems.

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This is an empathic and introspective account of the development of the self in gifted individuals based on work with gifted children and adults in several settings over a 27-year period, the last 17 as a psychotherapist. The observational data consist of a series of intense, in-depth studies of individuals rather than the averaged performance of large groups. The guiding concepts to interpret the data arise out of the psychoanalytic approaches of self psychology and object relations. The approach is psychodynamic, working directly with the origins and development of the self to empower people to change and grow. The view underlying this article is that the evolution of the self cannot be described adequately without reference to others. Although issues involving the self are universal, at least within this culture, it is in the particulars of the potential relationship between gifted individuals and others that helpful concepts can be derived to understand the nature of the development of gifted people, as well as the basis for emotional problems. This article describes the origins of the self in human development and then narrows the focus to the self of gifted individuals.

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The Self in Human Development

Definition

The sense of self develops throughout a lifetime and begins at least at birth (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993). It is sharpened with time and with an increased ability to understand abstractly. However, the emotional basis for the sense of meaning and coherence appears very early. This sense of identity or boundedness in time and space is experienced as an active agent who makes things happen, as in "I did this", or as a passive experiencer of feelings, as in, "I am sad", or as a formulator of thoughts and opinions, as in "I'm smarter than my classmates", or "I can't do this perfectly, so I'm worthless."

The self is described in a personal narrative or story about who we are, and it is, of course, nothing that can be referenced in the physical world. It is a construct, a metaphor, a way of seeing and conceptualizing the patterns of willful action and the inner experiences of one's life. In addition, it provides a framework for therapy. Thus, its heuristic value is immense.

Origin of the self

There are at least two ways in which the self arises. Mastery over objects in the environment contributes by producing the direct experience of competence. Comparisons to others and evaluations by others lead to judgments of relative worth. If these external evaluations are positive, a benign, accepting view of the self develops. If they are negative, the self is negative and shame may be experienced. External evaluations are powerful. Faced with constant criticism, even a high level of competence may not overcome a negative view of the self. The competence of gifted individuals is clearly a major factor in self development. In this article, however, the focus is primarily on the interpersonal origins of the self.

Mirroring and empathy

External evaluations can be verbal or non-verbal, and they can come in very subtle ways. For instance, it may be what a child sees when she looks into her parents' eyes. This is referred to as "mirroring" (Kohut, 1971; Miller, 1984), and it has a substantial effect. If a child comes home bursting with pride about something she's done, she may be met with one of several reactions. If a parent is excited about her success and says, "That's wonderful, I'll bet you're proud of that!", the child gets validation for her feelings and a sense that there is something good about her. She also learns a word ("proud") to describe her feelings, which in turn gives more of a concreteness and coherence to the self.

The child may receive other reactions. She might hear, "What are you so excited about — you can do better than that!", in which case she would question both her accomplishment and her ability to evaluate herself. She might even hear, "What's all the fuss?", or, "Don't be silly!", in which case she might begin to mislabel, or negatively label her emotional state. The coherence of the self begins to suffer in response to the mismatch between her internal feelings and the external evaluation of those feelings.

If a child looks into a parent's eyes and sees himself reflected there, in the mirror of his parent's pride, he can grow to feel worthwhile and valuable as a person. If what he sees there is his *parents'* needs — to pay attention to what they think is important, to have control over him, to be better than him, to be right about something — then his self is experienced as threatening, or perhaps as useless or a nuisance. His parents' anxieties are seen as arising because of him, rather than as their own, separate issue. This questioning of one's view of the self leads to a fragmentation or confusion of the self (Kohut, 1971), and one may attempt to use others or some agent (e.g. chemicals, sex, money), to repair one's self, or to help avoid emotional pain and turmoil. The healthy self is cohesive, as defined by a continuous history of interrelated meanings, and vital (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993), as defined by intensely felt needs that matter to others.

Mirroring produces an empathic connection with another person. Empathy involves the ability to see things as another person sees them and to understand what another person is feeling even if one does not, or would not, feel the same way. One who is empathized with feels understood at a basic level.

When children feel empathy from others, they develop the ability to empathize, both with themselves and with others. A parent or teacher might say to a gifted child that gifted individuals sometimes feel different from other people, and that this can be scary or sad. If the child acknowledges that she feels this way, the adult has made an empathic connection and can begin to understand what motivates the child's behavior. Kohut (1959, 1982; see also Bohart and Greenberg, 1997; Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993) referred to empathy as "vicarious introspection". He demonstrated its usefulness in studying human motivation and development, and in promoting healing and growth.

Essential Others

Human beings are complex and durable. Although an off-hand comment by an adult can have serious effects on a child, the self arises out of long-term experience in the growth environment. It is not the comment itself that has the effect: a negative comment can be piercing to someone who fears it is right and tossed off by someone who knows it is not. The difference is determined by relationship to an "essential other" (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993): a person whose image is carried inside. Such a person provides key elements of a self-view and acts as an "essential psychological nutrient" (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993, p.347). The experience of mirroring with this person, for example, leads to feelings of competence and self worth and the knowledge that negative comments are not likely to be true. Those familiar with self psychology refer to this effect other people have on the development of the self as the "self-object function" (Kohut, 1971; Lee & Martin, 1991).

A Dilemma

American, twentieth century culture presents a dilemma regarding connections with others. One of the most pervasive cultural icons is the rugged individualist, who has the frontier spirit and is able to strike out alone to conquer whatever physical or emotional wilderness lies ahead (to the west?). Since the time de Tocqueville wrote about this in depth (Bellah, Madsden, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985), another, opposite strain in the American social psyche has been recognized, which is conformist in nature. In acquiring consumer goods, as well as in thinking about political and religious issues, Americans wish to be like others, particularly within groups with which they identify. Thus, there is a constant, dynamic tension between being your own person and being a team player. This tension can have serious consequences for the consistency of self development. Doing one's own thing may lead to worries about letting other people down, while going along with others might entail sacrificing one's integrity. Frequently, the psychotherapeutic problem posed by a client is the problem of being forced to choose between personal integrity and allegiance to another person or group. The battered woman is one well-publicized example of this: by setting limits on the perpetrator, she risks losing a vital connection. A frequent dilemma for gifted children involves the choice between acting on talents and abilities and fitting in with a group (Gross, 1989). Where connections to essential others have been strong and positive, one feels confident in both one's individualism and one's connection to others.

Differentness

Modern America is a competitive culture in which making oneself just a little bit better than others seems like a basic element of human nature. It is more likely, however, that one's basic nature is to be connected to others. It is cooperation, not competition, that allows survival and develops the social structures and cultural artifacts which are depended on for comfortable living (de Waal, 1996; Kohn, 1992). Various societies may have advanced under pressure from other societies, but advancement still depends on the cooperative efforts of many.

The need to belong and to form strong and enduring bonds is a basic element of human motivation (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). In couples' therapy, partners in great pain and raging at one another work hard to resolve problems and recover a sense of bondedness. Even an individual in an abusive relationship might sacrifice personal safety to maintain a bond with the abuser.

One outcome of this tendency to bond with others is the problem of feeling different and not belonging (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993). A part of the self is determined by the group to which one belongs. The first connection is the family that nurtures the infant. Then, as the child grows and moves out into the world, there are friends, companions, colleagues, and coworkers, as well as members of our race, ethnic group, nationality, and religion. A sense of belonging is accompanied by feeling acceptable in someone's eyes. This makes it easier to take risks, including those involved in trying new things and learning. If a mistake is made, it is just a mistake, and one can move on.

Conversely, if one feels different from others and less acceptable, there may be a sense of inferiority or shame. This makes it harder to take a risk because a mistake makes one even more visibly different and less acceptable. A mistake is now closer to a character flaw. It takes a near super-human strength, in the face of profound animosity within one's group, to identify with a larger culture, or with humanity as a whole, and stand one's ground. This is why the stories of some of our cultural heroes — Jesus, Ghandi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., for example — are at once so inspiring and so tragic.

Differentness can be a source of pride, assuming one feels secure about oneself and experiences adequate self-object function, or it can be a source of shame.

The Gifted Self

Gifted children — and adults — are different. However the identification is made, gifted people are a numerical minority and few in number in any randomly selected group such as a public school classroom. Part of a gifted student's self, then, derives from this sense of differentness from others; whether this sense of differentness makes a difference depends in large measure on the level of acceptance by others — especially peers as the child grows — and on the child's internal feelings of acceptance. The perception of differentness determines many of a child's behavioral patterns (Cross, Coleman, and Terhaar-Yonkers, 1991; Gross, 1989; Sowa, McIntire, May, and Bland, 1994; Winner, 1996). Subtle forms of differentness that gifted children particularly might feel contribute substantially to the self and to some of the behavioral and emotional issues that may become problems. Examples include seeing things more deeply than others, understanding irony, or thinking that a task is easy while others complain of its difficulty.

The very notion of giftedness illustrates an important element of self development because an individual's experience of being gifted is comprised

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both of cognitive and creative *abilities* and of *relationships* to others. A student may feel good about his abilities to solve problems, and he may realize that he does this more quickly or more profoundly than others. Definitions of giftedness have largely centered on one or the other of these two aspects of the gifted experience. Either the nature of abilities and talents or the distinctions between gifted and non-gifted individuals is emphasized (Morelock, 1996). It would be useful, in addition, to concentrate on the *experience* of being gifted (Morelock, 1992, 1996), and thus on the nature of the self, as a focus of meaning in the gifted person's life.

Jack (not his real name) came to see me with his parents when he was in high school. He was failing several courses and was not doing his homework. On the other hand, whenever he would take an exam, he would make an "A" on it, and all of his standardized testing, since elementary school, showed him to be in the 99th percentile. His parents were generally supportive of him, but for years battled with him to do his work. His teachers were exasperated and refused to pass him despite his exam grades unless he turned in his work. Jack had been referred to as lazy, irresponsible, learning disabled (without assessment), slow, lucky on tests, rebellious, immature, and a troublemaker. When I asked him why he had decided to see me, he said he wanted to find out "what was wrong with him".

A brief conversation with Jack provided several clues to his self concept. He did, indeed, feel defective. He saw himself as embattled, disliked, judged, and scorned. As it happened, Jack had several positive qualities which were recognized and valued by others: he was making a major contribution to his church community about which he was very responsible, and his general knowledge in conversations with others was highly respected. He certainly felt good about this, but because Jack's performance in school was of paramount importance at that time, the rest was secondary. "Yes, he is talented, *but* look at his awful school performance." The point had been stressed to Jack that he would find it hard to get anywhere in life if he did poorly in school; as a result, he looked upon himself with a sense of doom.

It is not the intention here to argue whether adult caregivers in Jack's life were right or wrong about the facts of his life or about their judgments of him. At issue here is the development of Jack's self to which the judgments of others contribute substantially. Helping Jack certainly involved such things as teaching him study skills and affirming the very positive qualities he did possess, as well as discussing his options for the future. It was also important that the adults in Jack's life recognize that their anger and impatience with him, however justifiable, were making matters worse because Jack incorporated this anger into his concept of himself. To really promote fundamental change in Jack, there had to be an alteration in his basic system of meaning and self-coherence. He needed to see himself differently, if indeed he was to see his worth and his potential. This meant he would have to see that his negative self-view was conditioned by what he had heard about himself as well as by what he had done with his life, that it was possible for others to have a much more benign and positive view of him, and that the more benign views might be as real as his own more negative view.

An increased level of self-acceptance is important here, but this is an issue of one's perceived level of self-***acceptability***. One may feel (perhaps smugly), that she is perfectly all right as she is, but if she does not feel that she can fit in somewhere in her social environment, she will still feel alienated and alone. The self-view changes through the agency of a trusted essential other whose benign view is accepted as part of the reality of who one is. Reaching a gifted child, or for that matter any child, to promote change, involves some kind of empathic contact with the child's self, and the addition of an inner voice with a different kind of message. Working with gifted individuals involves some understanding of the particulars of their selves.

There is no one self of gifted individuals any more than there is for any other group of people. There is a range of possible selves with some recurrent themes potentially arising because of an individual's giftedness. Examples of such themes are: I am different from others, I am special, I have the potential to be perfect, I must do well, I must always question my abilities, something is wrong with me.

Jodi was brought to me by her distraught mother. At the time Jodi was a gifted high school senior who was using pot, not doing school work, and in love with a school dropout currently in jail. Jodi was a creative, assertive young woman who liked to experiment with life; the drug crowd in school suited Jodi's rebellious part and, although most were not as bright as Jodi, they were a very accepting group. Jodi found herself on the horns of a dilemma in class. She typically knew the answers to questions the teacher asked. If she offered the answer, the bright students would be offended that someone in the drug-using group would know the answer, and the people in the drug group would feel alienated by her intellect.

There were other personal and family issues affecting Jodi's development as well, such as being a gifted female and her parents' divorce, but the vignette illustrates a potentially fragmented self and several issues related to being gifted in this culture. Jodi was not sure where she belonged, and she had little support among her peers for being who she was — a talented, assertive young woman. It was as though, if one believed one set of identifiers for Jodi, one couldn't believe the other at the same time. Jodi dis-identified with other gifted students in part because she didn't like many of them personally, and in part because she didn't believe they would like her. She also couldn't identify entirely with the drug-using group because she was different from many of them in a fundamental way — her intellect. Who was she? It turns out that this question involves a certain amount of pain and anxiety, and people are likely to look for ways to soothe the pain. Among the more notable of these, as mentioned above, are drugs and sex.

Note that Jodi's self arises out of her personal qualities, including being gifted (and being a drug user), and out of the responses of essential others in her life. To help her, one needed to understand the threat to her coherence of self, and to offer her a connection to an essential other who provided a realistic but more accepting view. The functions of such an essential other can be provided by a therapist, but a dynamic approach to family therapy also aims at establishing these functions among family members through the growth of empathic connections (Scharff & Scharff, 1987). Jodi needed to rise above the dilemma involving personal integrity vs. group identification by being able to rely on a coherent and vital self.

Jodi's case demonstrates one of the many problems in the development of the self in gifted individuals, although other groups of individuals may face similar problems. Again, gifted people are different from those around them, which poses an immediate problem of self identity. Beyond this, when gifted people do well, they may engender a sense of shame and/or jealousy in those around them. The gifted person might then perceive

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others as angry and rejecting, and the conclusion is frequently that the gifted person has done something bad.

Issues in the Development of the Gifted Self

A variety of current issues in the literature on working with gifted individuals can be addressed from the perspective of the development of the self. Four of these are briefly considered here.

Perfectionism

The problem of perfectionism has been written about extensively (Adderholdt-Elliott, 1987; Parker and Adkins, 1995; Silverman, 1991). Gifted individuals are perhaps especially prone to perfectionism since it may frequently be possible for them to actually do something perfectly. This culture tends to reward perfection and downplay effort. The Olympic games always bring this to awareness, since, at least in the view of the major media, athletes are seen as either gold medalists or losers. Many also have the attitude, represented by large numbers of athletic coaches, that competent performance should be taken for granted, while players, or students or employees or supervisees, need to hear about what they have done wrong. Children put these things together and come up with the idea that they can never be good enough.

> Frank was an "A" student, highly artistically talented, and well connected with friends. His mother and father felt a constant need to encourage Frank to do well; they were proud of him, but in a way that made it seem like they were wearing him as a badge. Mom's response to the news of a near-perfect test score from Frank was typically, "What happened to the other points?" As a young adult, Frank had become cynical and removed from his emotions, and he was having difficulty maintaining intimate relationships.

Again, there were many issues affecting Frank's life other than those involving his intellect, but his giftedness did engender specific problems. It was clearly important to his mother's own sense of self that Frank do well, and it became apparent that Frank was in many ways responsible for his mother's self-esteem. Perfectionism is an interpersonal phenomenon and always involves some anxiety that, absent perfection, the person is worthless or not acceptable. One might rejoin here that many perfectionists seem to be struggling to meet ***their own*** internal standards, as though these arose in a vacuum, but clinical investigation never shows this to be so. Internal performance standards are taken on from others in one's world and have to do with what will make one acceptable. There are several responses to this dynamic, which is why perfectionists might look different from one another. One person might appear overanxious and distraught — the child who, for example, begins a project and then crumples up the paper and begins again because it isn't good enough. Another might not do homework at all, on the implicit theory that it is better to get a low grade and go on in the (perhaps fanciful) hope that, had the work been turned in, it would have earned an "A". Actual judgment is thus avoided. In still other instances, one may do well, but develop a defensive denial of the validity of anyone else's judgment, thus failing to be able to hear legitimate criticism.

Any of the outward manifestations of perfectionism lead back to the idea of the self as conditionally acceptable. This is why telling a perfectionist not to worry about being perfect is heard as a criticism of how good the person is at being a perfectionist. The resolution of perfectionism frequently involves repair of the self. An understanding of the origins of one's perfectionism, and of the anxieties connected with it, plus a connection with an empathic, supportive other, helps with the process of altering one's self.

Labeling

It is important to know about one's giftedness. Although this point is the subject of much debate among parents and teachers, the primary negative concerns are around such issues as pigeonholing or labeling (Freeman, 1991; Gould, 1996; Winner, 1996), with all the attendant positive and negative reactions. There is also a concern that the child, and perhaps the parents, will be arrogant about the label and look down on others. Some parents say they do not want to give their child a "swelled head". All of these important concerns involve people's responses to the label and should certainly be addressed. In the meantime, leaving the description "gifted" (or similar descriptors) out of discussions with children robs them of a crucial fact in their attempts to maintain a coherent self. If a child is bored in class and finds it hard to pay attention, is it because he is stupid and perhaps lazy, or is it because he is gifted and able to understand the material well before the class presentation is over? This latter description does not give one more value as a human being, but it does if it is true, give a child a more benign and integrated self view. It also helps a child to understand precisely what his problem is and suggests ways to remedy it.

The worry about labeling is frequently an understandable concern about highlighting the child's differentness. A reluctance to label does not eliminate the child's feelings of differentness, however, and a child isn't helped by pretending that a difference doesn't exist. The usual result of doing this is the child's conclusion that the perceived difference is not to be spoken of, which in turn leads to shame and diminished self coherence. Although this is often illustrated in reference to children who have been abused and who must keep it secret, any secret about one's personal history can become a source of shame and decreased vitality of self.

Adult Development

> Ben was in his mid-forties, an ambitious, successful businessman and recovering alcoholic. His recovery program had taught him that his life was a "juggling act with too many balls in the air"; he was constantly in motion, never feeling his accomplishments were good enough, and his relationship with his wife was distant and sometimes combative. Ben's children, who were experiencing some emotional problems of their own, were in gifted programs. In reflecting on his own experiences, Ben remembered being an outsider, a rebel of sorts. He and a few friends were very cynical about the other students and about school in general. As teenagers, they were frequently finding ways to skip school, sometimes to drink or use pot. Ben remembers doing very well in school, always getting A's on tests, though never doing much homework and, of course, being in trouble for this. Ben thought school was "a joke" ; he went to college, with little parental assistance, and eventually dropped out when the work load got heavy and his drinking increased. He had little idea what he wanted to do with his life, though he did marry a bright classmate with whom he had an intense physical, and drinking, relationship.

It is not known that Ben is gifted, since there are no objective measures, but his school experience, his gifted progeny, and his accomplishments as a self-made man make the assumption reasonable. If the integrity of the self is compromised during childhood and adolescence, people such as Ben might spend a lifetime seeking to unite the

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fragments or to soothe the pain. Here again, empathic contact with another person, who can offer a different perspective on the facts of our life, forms the basis for a renewal of the self. Ben knew he was bright, but his experience as an outsider and as an obstinate student, as well as a fair amount of parental disapproval and neglect, convinced him that he was just lucky in school, that his classmates simply didn't have the same luck, and that he was somehow profoundly defective. Alcohol was a medication for pain and anxiety. Of course, sobriety was the first priority for Ben; after that, he was able to see himself differently. Feelings of shame about being defective were replaced by feelings of sadness that a bright and motivated student had never understood his intelligence and had never been able to see how to use it in his favor. The essential others in his life had all been kept at a distance and many of them had their own problems with fragmented selves. Ben's case illustrates that problems with the development of the gifted self can persist into adulthood.

Excellence vs. Equity

Concerns about labeling are sometimes related to the issue, particularly poignant in an individualistic culture, of excellence and equity in the classroom. Can one respond to the needs of some students without closing other students out? This also has been widely discussed in the literature (Fetterman, 1988; Sternberg, 1996), but the debate does have implications for the subject of the development of the self. It seems reasonable that every child be given the opportunity to have an educational program suited to his or her needs — this would be the definition of educational equity. If this were the case, problems of falling behind in class and being frustrated, as well as being ahead and bored, would diminish, and, with them, a major source of negative self-image for some students. The cultural commitment to egalitarianism is frequently misconstrued as requiring sameness of experience. Covering the same material in class, however, is not the same as having similar experiences of being challenged at an appropriate level. Equality cannot be construed to mean sameness when people's needs are different, and failure to address or take seriously a student's individual needs will potentially affect the coherence and vitality of the student's self.

Conclusion

The fact that human beings are wired up to relate to one another means that humans do not operate alone. Essential others help to form each person's experience of self. Independence and autonomy are important in order to pursue goals in life, but the limits to which these ideals can be pressed have to do with one's ultimate dependence on others. The term interdependence refers to the relationships among functional people of good personal integrity. Gifted children need others in their lives to recognize and value their giftedness, to provide them with appropriate resources, and to encourage them to learn. This is a healthy interdependence which promotes growth.

At a deeper level, the self of the gifted child depends on the reactions of essential others. Recognizing, valuing, and cherishing the personal qualities of the gifted child leads to the recognition, valuing, and cherishing of the self by the child.

This article addresses parents, professionals, and others who wish to have a connected relationship with a gifted individual. A more profound understanding of gifted people is to be had by examining the subjective world of feelings and emotional responses, rather than simply the observable external facts about performance and behavior (Morelock, 1992, 1996; Roeper, 1996; Tolan, 1992). The very definition of giftedness is enriched by this internal view; for example, Morelock (1993), reflecting the work of the "Columbus Group" in their reassessment of giftedness, suggests that:

> [g]iftedness implies an advanced ability to construct meaning in the context of experience, including an enhanced capacity to think abstractly and to respond emotionally to abstract concepts used in the interpretation of experiential phenomena. Giftedness permeates the whole of one's intellectual, social and emotional reality (p. 16).

The ideas described in this article are compatible with this definition. The actual meanings which are constructed form the basis of the gifted individual's self. The experiences to which meanings are attached involve interrelations with objects and with other people. Mastery over objects in the environment, though especially strong in many gifted individuals, still gets much of its meaning from the responses of other people, especially from essential others who are intimately connected and whose responses to us support our sense of coherence of self.

An empathic investigation of the self of gifted individuals allows for both greater understanding and greater connection. It becomes easier to see, for example, why some gifted children would dis-identify with their giftedness in the hopes of maintaining more nourishing connections with others. This disidentification, however, leads to a fragmentation of the self, which psychoanalytic theory suggests leads to increased anxiety and consequent attempts to soothe. Essential others who understand, accept, and value the giftedness of an individual contribute to the integration of the gifted person's self through feelings of being valued and accepted.

A healthy self is a personal narrative reflecting cohesion and vitality. Gifted individuals are at risk for fragmentation of the self because of their differentness from many of those around them, in the context of our culturally induced conflict between personal integrity (or individualism), and group membership. Intelligence as utilized by a gifted person, and the social responses to this use of intelligence, determine how the self of the gifted person develops. Ultimately, these also determine what the person's giftedness will look like to others. Hence, going beyond the measurement of external variables to a knowledge of the gifted individual's self adds a deeper understanding of the person and indicates more about how to help when help is needed.

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The "Me" Behind the Mask: *Intellectually Gifted Students and the Search for Identity*

Miraca U.M. Gross

The process of identity development in intellectually gifted children and adolescents is complicated by their innate and acquired differences from age-peers. To be valued within a peer culture which values conformity, gifted young people may mask their giftedness and develop alternative identities which are perceived as more socially acceptable. The weaving of this protective mask requires the gifted child to conceal her love of learning, her interests which differ from those of age-peers, and her advanced moral development. If this assumed identity does indeed bring her the social acceptance she seeks, the gifted child may become afraid to take off her mask. Gifted children and adolescents need the opportunity to work and socialize with others of similar abilities and interests if they are to grow towards self-acceptance. This article is illustrated by poetry and diary entries written by highly gifted young people, portraying the process of their own identity development.

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"I have come to the conclusion that the degree of my difference from most people exceeds the average of most people's difference from one another; or, to put it more briefly, that my reactions to many things don't conform to popular patterns."

(C.E.M. Joad, 1947.)

During the 1940s and 1950s, one of the most popular radio programs in Britain was *The Brains Trust* in which a panel of intellectuals, entertainers or politicians, chosen for their skill with words and ideas, responded to questions sent in by listeners. One of the most popular panelists was Professor C.E.M. Joad, a brilliant scholar and gifted writer who had a remarkable ability to explain highly complex, sometimes controversial theories in language that made them accessible, and, indeed, fascinating to the layperson.

Joad was extremely precise in his response to questions. He was constantly aware of the ambiguity of the language in which the questions were often phrased and he was anxious to ensure that his answer was both accurate and clearly understood. His somewhat pedantic response to almost any question; "It all depends on what you mean by..." was greeted by the studio audience with the delighted and affectionate laughter with which they would have greeted the catchphrase of a favorite comedian. Few listeners understood the urge which prompted the response - Joad's *need* to define the terms of the question both for himself and for the audience, to delineate the grey areas, and to clarify precisely those aspects to which he felt he could respond. For this gentle, scholarly man, the careful and deliberate qualification with which he started his response was an integral and essential *part* of the answer.

Despite his skill and popularity as a communicator, Joad found personal relationships difficult. As the above quotation shows, he was constantly aware of his difference from the great majority of people, and the degree of that difference. It was typical of this great scholar that his analysis of the degree of difference has almost a statistical flavor! Linked to this awareness was the ever-present longing for congenial companionship, and the knowledge, bought with experience, that he was unlikely to find it. Indeed, a few years before his death, he confided to a colleague, "My life is spent in a perpetual alternation between two rhythms, the rhythm of attracting people for fear I may be lonely, and the rhythm of getting rid of them because I know that I am bored" (Joad, 1948).

Like many other highly gifted adults, Joad had developed a range of professional identities within which he was accepted by others - the scholar, the writer, the broadcaster. It was, however, extremely difficult for him to maintain productive social relationships. The characteristics, attitudes and opinions which people accepted in Joad the scholar were a hindrance in his attempts to develop an identity as a private individual. As he himself phrased it, his "reactions to many things" did not "conform to popular patterns".

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