



Can you hear the flowers sing? Issues for gifted adults.

Deirdre V. Lovecky

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Abstract

There has been comparatively little focus in the literature on the characteristics and social and emotional needs of gifted adults. Using observational data, the author attempts to delineate some of the positive and negative social effects of traits displayed by gifted adults. Five traits (divergency, excitability, sensitivity, perceptivity, and entelechy) seem to produce potential interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict. Unless gifted adults learn to value themselves and find support, identity conflicts and depression may result. Emphasis on self-growth through knowing and accepting self leads to the discovery of sources of personal power. Nurturing relationships through realistic expectations and learning to share oneself provides a supportive environment in which gifted adults can grow and flourish.

Although the personality traits and social and emotional needs of gifted children have been widely described (Erlich, 1982; Terman, 1925; Torrance, 1962; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982), there has been comparatively little focus on gifted adults. Numerous longitudinal studies have indicated that the early advantage experienced by gifted children continues into adulthood and that gifted children become adults of superior vocational achievement, generally satisfied with themselves and their lives (Oden, 1968; Terman & Oden, 1947, 1959). Nevertheless, by age 62, most gifted men have experienced the same dissatisfactions with family life as have most people (R.R. Sears, 1977). The gifted women reported to be happiest have been those with the best coping skills, which are dependent on early experience (P.S. Sears & Barbee, 1977). In fact, the effects of early experience, particularly in terms of early educational advantage, seem to be one of the most important contributory factors in later adult achievement (Bloom, 1964; Oden, 1968; Terman, 1925).

In studies of male scientists (Roe, 1952), creative artists and writers (Cattell, 1971), female mathematicians (Helson, 1971), and architects (MacKinnon, 1962), among others, the predominant characteristics found included impulsivity, curiosity, high need for independence, high energy level, introversion, intuitiveness, emotional sensitivity, and nonconformity.

For the most part, the literature on gifted adults does not address the social impact of the various traits described. Piechowski and Colangelo (1984) indicated that certain modes of mental functioning are not socially valued because their expression causes discomfort in others. These traits were termed overexcitabilities, that is, wider and more intense experiences in psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional areas. Gifted adults seem to be characterized by imaginal, intellectual, and emotional overexcitabilities.

In this article I attempt to delineate some of the social aspects (both positive and negative) of traits displayed by gifted adults. I selected gifted adults from among my colleagues, acquaintances, friends, and psychotherapy clients. Of the 15 gifted adults included, 6 were therapy clients. There were 8 women and 7 men ranging in age from 20 to 79. Of these, 6 were doctoral-level professionals, 4 were master's-level professionals, and 3 were students. Fields of endeavor included the social sciences, education, medicine, the biological sciences, business and computers, art, literature, and history. Identification of giftedness was based on a variety of criteria, including identification of giftedness in childhood, memory of scores on achievement or IQ tests, SAT scores, current professional achievement, or attainment of national recognition for achievement.

Using anecdotal and observational material as a basis, I describe five traits that seem to be present in gifted adults and that seem to be central features of their giftedness. The goal is to generate a group of hypotheses about gifted adults and their interactions with others. Further explorations of these preliminary ideas, using more refined research methodology, will undoubtedly provide a more elaborate explanation of the impact of giftedness on the lives of those concerned.

Characteristics of Gifted Adults

There seem to be five traits that produce potential interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict: divergency, excitability, sensitivity, perceptivity, and entelechy. The first three traits have been derived from Torrance's (1961, 1962, 1965) descriptions of creatively gifted children. The last two traits were developed from discussions with gifted adults. These traits seem to be an integral part of giftedness; however, the behavioral manifestations of these traits may vary depending on other physiological and personality factors, such as tolerance for ambiguity, degree of introversion or extroversion, and preference for particular types of sensory input. Gifted adults may exhibit several of the traits. The gifted adults who served as a basis for this article all exhibited at least three (divergency, excitability, and sensitivity).



Although the traits in themselves are neutral, their behavioral manifestations make them socially and emotionally significant. For example, the trait of sensitivity can be manifested as empathy, commitment, touchiness, intensity, or vulnerability. Thus, in any individual, the sum of the behavioral manifestations may be viewed as positive or negative.

Trait Descriptions

Divergency. A preference for unusual, original, and creative responses is characteristic of divergent thinkers. The positive side of the trait includes people who are often high achievers, innovative in a number of fields, task committed, self-starters, and highly independent. Many theoretical scientists, writers, artists, composers, and philosophers are divergent thinkers. Einstein, Freud, and the French impressionists are examples of gifted adults successful in using their divergent thinking ability.

Divergent thinking has positive social and emotional value. Gifted adults possessing this trait are able to find creative solutions to a wide variety of problems, including interpersonal problems, and are able to see several aspects of any situation. In an organization, they are often the “idea” people who bring challenge and enthusiasm to others. They find deep personal satisfaction in the development of new ideas. Divergent thinkers challenge stereotypes. Socially, they bring color to the lives of others, who may use their example to find the courage to break the bonds of conformity and decrease the effects of prejudice.

On the negative side, divergent thinkers encounter difficulty in situations in which group consensus is important. They are often dedicated to their own ideas and find it difficult to support ideas they find foolish. The usual rewards may not motivate divergent thinkers. In fact, they may ignore a reward system imposed by others to work on their own. In social situations, divergent thinkers may not fit in. Common social rules, such as not criticizing others publicly or not disagreeing with one perceived by the majority to be influential, may be disregarded. The dilemma of the divergent thinker is one of maintaining identity in the face of pressure to conform. A highly divergent thinker is often a minority of one. If no one else hears the flowers singing, the divergent thinker may experience alienation and eventually an existential depression.

Excitability. High energy level, emotional reactivity, and high nervous system arousal characterize the trait of excitability. Although excitability and hyperactivity may seem to be similar, they are fundamentally different in that gifted adults with the trait of excitability are able to focus their attention and concentration for long periods of time, to use their energy productively in a wide variety of interests, and to do many things well. These gifted adults enjoy the excitement of taking risks and meeting challenges. This risk taking is dissimilar to that found in mania or impulsivity in that the gifted adult (a) is aware of the consequences of the risk, (b) takes risks in the form of challenges rather than reckless activities, and (c) knows when to stop.

The high energy level of these gifted adults allows them to produce prodigiously in whatever most captures their interest. They often pave the way for others to follow with refinements of their innovative ideas. Many inventors and entrepreneurs have the trait of excitability. Thomas Edison and Leonardo da Vinci are examples of people who possessed this trait.

The trait of excitability has positive social and emotional value. Productivity and risk taking create new ideas and innovations. There is energy to spend on a variety of projects and personal concerns without the necessity of choosing whether to expend energy on work or self. Finally, these gifted adults know their feelings, act on the basis of these feelings, and are unafraid of the appropriate expression of feelings.

On the negative side, gifted adults with this trait may find it difficult to self-regulate. Boredom and the need for stimulation can produce a habit of constant activity. Some gifted adults may be unable to follow through on projects because they crave novelty. A cycle of high interest and activity for a new venture, followed by loss of interest when the novelty decreases and details must be addressed, can leave others feeling frustrated and angry. In addition, some gifted adults may feel little satisfaction with what has been achieved. Their dilemma is one of always doing but feeling little gratification because others often reap the rewards accruing from the long-term development of their initial ideas. A chronic depression that triggers more activity may be the result. These gifted adults may know that the flowers sing but may never have a chance to enjoy them.

Sensitivity. A depth of feeling that results in a sense of identification with others characterizes the trait of sensitivity. Gifted people form deep attachments and react to the feeling tone of situations; they think with their feelings. People who are highly sensitive make commitments to other people and to social causes. They can be enthusiastic and intensely single-minded about their dedication. Poets, Investigative reporters, Peace Corps workers, and political and religious leaders are often gifted in sensitivity. Examples of such people include St. Francis of Assisi, Elizabeth Blackwell, Emily Dickinson, Ghandi, Martin Luther King, and Virginia Woolf.



People gifted with the trait of sensitivity find positive social and emotional benefit in their deep concern for the needs and rights of others, their empathy for the feelings of others, and their desire to help even at significant cost to themselves. These gifted adults may be unusually aware of the feeling tone of situations and of the more sensual aspects of the environment, such as color and shading. They are often aware of their own shortcomings. Some gifted adults feel a sense of unity with the cosmos, an experience of a universal sharing of self. Adults gifted with sensitivity tend to be highly moral people concerned with giving and with doing what is right for others.

On the negative side, these gifted adults may not understand that others do not feel so deeply or intensely or that others may have different priorities. They may be very intolerant of the needs of others when they perceive those needs to be superficial.

Adults gifted in sensitivity may be so sensitive that others may hesitate to share problems with them. In fact, other people may believe that the gifted adult experiences their pain more intensely than they do, and they may feel robbed of their own feelings. These gifted adults must learn to guard their vulnerability while still remaining sensitive to others, to continue caring in the face of rejection, and to moderate emotional responsiveness so that they feel “with” rather than “for.” The risk is that they will become isolates who avoid relationships that could nurture them. They hear the flowers singing, feel a unity with the universe, and want everyone else to hear the song as well.

Perceptivity. An ability to view several aspects of a situation simultaneously, to understand several layers of self within another, and to see quickly to the core of an issue are characteristic of the trait of perceptivity. These gifted adults are able to understand the meaning of personal symbols and to see beyond the superficiality of a situation to the person beneath. Skilled at understanding motivations, they may be able to help others to understand themselves. Adults gifted with perceptivity are those who can hear the flowers singing within others not yet aware of their own gifts. Their intuition and ability to understand several layers of feeling simultaneously help them to assess people and situations rapidly. In fact, they are often skilled at sensing the incongruity between exhibited social facades and real thoughts and feelings. Another aspect of perceptivity concerns the recognition of and need for truth. Social facades displayed by others may seem to this gifted adult to be a sort of lie. Adults gifted in this way detect and dislike falsehood and hypocrisy.

People who are gifted at “seeing” often seem to have a touch of magic about them. Religious and political leaders, philosophers, creative therapists, writers, and poets may be especially gifted with perceptivity. Jane Austen, Langston Hughes, Anne Hutchinson, William Shakespeare, and Henry David Thoreau are all examples.

Positive social and emotional correlates of the trait of perceptivity include the ability of these gifted adults to view their own behavior somewhat objectively, to assess their own as well as others’ motivations, and to base their responses on perceptions of underlying dynamics. They are aware not only of what their own needs are but also of the necessity of avoiding internal stress by learning to use their perceptions to know what they truly want. Often, they will decide to do what is best for themselves despite the disapproval of others.

On the negative side, this trait can present difficulties in interpersonal relationships because others, unaware of what the gifted adult sees so clearly, feel both vulnerable and threatened. For the gifted adult, seeing several layers of a person may be confusing. It may be difficult to pair the response obtained with what the situation seemed to indicate was required. The more discrepancy between the inner self and outer face, the more uncomfortable the gifted adult may feel.

The dilemma of this gifted adult is whether to hide the insights and respond superficially to the social facade or to use the gift and risk rejection. Either course may produce constraint and difficulty with spontaneity. Finding interpersonal support is a major priority for these gifted adults; the risk is fear of closeness and intimacy.

Entelechy. From the Greek word for having a goal, entelechy bespeaks a particular type of motivation, inner strength, and vital force directing life and growth to become all the self is capable of being. Adults gifted in entelechy are highly attractive to others who feel drawn to openness, warmth, and closeness. Being near someone with this trait gives others hope and motivation to achieve their own self-actualization. Teachers, therapists, physicians, and social reformers may be among those so gifted. Examples include Helen Keller, Carl Rogers, and Eleanor Roosevelt.

People gifted in entelechy bring deep feelings to a relationship. By spontaneously expressing feelings, they encourage others to do so as well. Their example of overcoming obstacles and their continuing support and interest encourage others to grow. They not only hear the flowers singing but invite others to hear them too.

People gifted in entelechy are capable of creating “golden moments” of friendship, those special times when two people are truly their best selves and able to share on a deep level (N. Jenckes, personal communication, December 26, 1984). Gifted adults may find sources of rare intimacy; however, they may also find an overwhelming number of people who want contact but have little

to offer in return. They may feel vulnerable to and intruded on by the demands of others who may feel cheated that the promise implied in the initial sharing cannot continue. The dilemma of these gifted adults is to find ways to nurture the self through others while avoiding the expenditure of vital personal resources on others' needs. The risk is anxiety about requests from others and avoidance of closeness in interpersonal relationships.

Options For Self Growth

The five traits described may lead to crises; gifted adults continuously face choices that seem to lead either to denial of gifts or rejection by others. Unless they learn to value self and find support from others, these adults will experience identity crises whenever the conflict resurfaces. This process entraps creative energy, which is then lost to creative production.

Gifted adults can learn to deal creatively with their conflicts. Although many use the resources of psychotherapy, one of the primary traits of adult giftedness is a need for independence. Thus, they may wish to find their own unique ways to nurture themselves and to develop supportive relationships. Some options to be considered might include the following.

Nurturing the Self.

Knowing and loving all aspects of oneself enables one to find and use sources of personal power.

Knowing oneself. Discovering personal symbols can help gifted people understand and value their insights and intuitions. Personal symbols can be explored in a variety of ways, including daydreaming, analysis of dreams, poetry writing, sketching, and the use of imagery and visualization techniques. Lazarus (1977) described visualization techniques and Moffat and Painter (1974) described the use of journal writing to define and maintain self in a sometimes hostile world.

Accepting oneself. Valuing their uniqueness is necessary for gifted adults in accepting themselves. Valuing and accepting negative traits can be a means of freeing energy to deal creatively with life. If the gifted adult is able to accept faults and vulnerabilities, then the positive sides of these traits can come to light. Energy will not be focused on feeling unhappy about self or on denying faults and failings. Most creativity develops from the energy found in discontent; using discomfort as a sign that creative energy is available allows for the taking charge of self rather than for feeling fated to misfortune.

Finding sources of personal power. Freeing self the constraints that inhibit use of creativity by listening to inner messages is one means of finding personal power. Learning to use loneliness rather than avoiding or fearing it can be an important means of increasing personal power (C.A. Martin, personal communication, June 12, 1984). Many gifted adults are lonely because of a lack of true peers. Feeling comfortable with oneself, having a wide variety of interests, knowing that there are some people who value at least parts of themselves, and viewing lonely times as a chance of further self-care and self-exploration are ways of growing in personal power.

Nurturing Interpersonal Relationships

Having realistic and sensitive expectations for oneself and others and being able to share oneself with others are vital to the development of supportive interpersonal relationships. Gifted adults often have high expectations for themselves and others. Sometimes they forget that other people are not gifted in the ways they are. In fact, gifted adults may need to develop an appreciation for the talents of others. Recognition of others' talents can lead to warm friendships in which different talents can complement each other. The lives of Salieri and Mozart might have been completely different had each been able to value the other.

Understanding the effects of one's giftedness on others entails a realization that the same behaviors may elicit different responses from different people and from the same people at different times. For example, emotional intensity can be energizing at one time but exhausting at another. Different limits may have to be negotiated with individuals (D.K. Baker, personal communication, December 22, 1984). Just as sensitive gifted adults may cause others to feel robbed of deep feelings, the anxiety expressed by others may cause the gifted person to feel robbed of the chance to make decisions about the relationship. Learning to set clear boundaries and to negotiate particular limits on giving, expenditure of time and energy, and individual needs for distance and expression of uniqueness can help gifted adults feel some sense of choice in a relationship.

Because of their inner depth and complexity, gifted adults may need to find a large number of friends, each of whom can meet some needs and reflect some aspects of self. Gifted adults sometimes expect to share everything with one person and over-look the special relationships that can develop around one interest or one facet of self.

Sharing one's particular gifts with another can be a source of both self-sustenance and connectedness to others. Some gifts are easier to share with individual friends; others may require a larger audience. A special kind of sharing occurs in the writing of



poetry, as described by Harrower (1972). She discussed the need to communicate as an integral part of the experience of writing a poem. Writing poetry is a self-enhancing process that occurs by connecting the writer in some new way to other people, it is from this sort of sharing that emotional growth is fostered.

Gifted adults can use their special talents to help others find their own creativity and their own sources of inner power. Finding ways of sharing self can enhance both people in a relationship and bring depth to that relationship as it grows and changes over time.

Conclusion

Gifted adults, perhaps more than any other group, have the potential to achieve a high degree of self-actualization. Despite the problems that being gifted can bring, the positive social and emotional aspects of giftedness can more than compensate for the problems. To continue to hear the flowers singing and to turn visions and dreams to reality throughout an entire lifetime is a goal to be desired by every gifted adult.

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