

INTENSITIVE!
Intensities and Sensitivities of the Gifted

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The terms most descriptive of the gifted population are *intense* and *sensitive*—in short, *INTENSITIVE!* What makes the gifted “intensive”? In studying this group intensively for more than 40 years, I have found the following qualitative differences in their experience:

- ❑ Intensity
- ❑ Sensitivity
- ❑ Idealism
- ❑ Perceptiveness
- ❑ Overexcitability
- ❑ Asynchrony
- ❑ Complexity
- ❑ Introversion
- ❑ Perfectionism
- ❑ Moral concern

Giftedness creates a different organization of the Self. Cognitive complexity, emotional sensitivity, heightened imagination, and magnified sensations combine to create “a different quality of experiencing: vivid, absorbing, penetrating, encompassing, complex, commanding—a way of being quiveringly alive” (Piechowski, 1992, p. 181). An unusual mind coupled with unusual emotions leads to unusual life experiences throughout the life cycle.

Gifted children and adults feel cut off from the rest of society—out of sync. A gifted mind is a relentless idea generator that creates more things to do than there are hours in the day. And creative ideas tend to show up at the least convenient times... Highly capable people are asked to assume the lion’s share of responsibilities, and life can quickly deteriorate into an endless list of tasks to be accomplished. Gifted people often wear many hats and try to juggle more than is humanly possible. All of it seems interesting and worth doing...if only there was an infinite amount of time. And the gifted set standards well beyond those of others. They’re never satisfied doing a “good enough” job; they want to do everything to the best of their ability.

Giftedness creates a different worldview. Impossible dreams are realized, unrealistic goals achieved, insurmountable obstacles surmounted, by people whose vision is a more powerful reality than the limitations that most of the world accepts as “real.” Peak experiences and devastating lows often come with the territory. Rushes of energy at unpredictable times drive gifted adults until they find “that note,” as Dustin Hoffman so aptly described it during the 1996 Golden Globe awards.

Gifted adults are often driven by their giftedness. Gifted individuals do not know what creates the drive, the energy, the absolute necessity to act. They may have no choice but to explore, compose, write, paint, develop theories...conduct research, or do whatever else it is that has become uppermost in their minds. They need to know; they need to learn; they must climb the mountain because it is there. This “drivenness,” this one-track-mindedness, may keep them from sleeping or eating, from engaging in sex or any other normal behavior, for the duration of their specific involvement. (Roeper, 1991, p. 90)

Is this a drive to achieve? Not necessarily. “They need to know; they need to learn; they must climb the mountain because it is there.” The gifted individual is driven by both curiosity and the need for expression—in words, art, music, dance, visual models, mathematical formulas, whatever. Sometimes this drivenness results in accomplishments that everyone admires, but more often it concentrates on mundane activities that have significance only for the individual: an exquisite flower arrangement, a brilliantly executed chess move, a fabulous idea, a to-die-for chocolate sauce... The elation that comes from finding “that note,” that word, that move, that brush stroke, that solution, is indescribable. It’s pure magic. At that moment, no external rewards matter. There is only the delicious appreciation of *now*. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls it “flow.”

Controlling an unmercifully creative mind is like trying to lasso a bull in an open field: It basically goes wherever it wants! It rarely stops to listen to what it already knows. However, when engaged, it has the capacity to observe or reflect with profound concentration. The emotions of the gifted person are just as unruly. Anything worth feeling is worth feeling *intensely*. Nothing is simple, bland, or colorless. Everything is electrically charged with rich, multicolored layers of meaning.

We are not “normal” and we know it; it can be fun sometimes but not funny always. We tend to be much more sensitive than other people. Multiple meanings, innuendos, and self-consciousness plague us. Intensive self-analysis, self-criticism, and the inability to recognize that we have limits make us despondent. (American Association for Gifted Children, 1978, p. 9)

The Cost of Being Different

The gifted are the only group with special needs who can pretend to be like everyone else. But this is not without cost to the Self. When too much emphasis is placed on the child’s fitting in with others, being normal is elevated to the number one goal in life. And the only alternative to normal appears to be “abnormal.” The dread of abnormality can be so overwhelming that the gifted may feign normalcy, deny their differences, and hide their rich inner worlds from ridicule.

Some gifted children learn very early in life to play the game. They sacrifice their authenticity and pretend to be someone they are not so that they are more acceptable to

others. In Elizabeth Drews' (1972) words, "Our children are taught to don masks before they recognize their own faces. They are made to put their tender, pliable forms into prefabricated shells" (p. 3). Trying to fit in at the expense of one's Self leads many gifted people to feel like aliens from a different planet (Wallach, 1995).

When I was little I used to stand and stare up at the stars and wonder which one of them held the solar system that was my real home... Hey, up there on Home Planet, time to beam me up! Joke's over. Experiment's done. I want to come home now. Do you hear me? (Tolan, 1996, p. 13)

But what is normal? Do these phrases sound familiar to you?

- *"Why do you make everything so complicated?"*
- *"Why do you take everything so seriously?"*
- *"Why is everything so important to you?"*

Dr. Pat Gatto-Walden calls these "the terrible toos": The gifted are "too" everything: too sensitive, too intense, too driven, too honest, too idealist, too moral, too perfectionistic, too much for other people! So they live with the great secret, instilled from early childhood on, that there is something inherently wrong with being who they are because they don't fit in.

Many of the problems that beset the gifted can be traced to the lack of awareness, understanding, and acceptance of the differences inherent in being developmentally advanced. It is emotionally damaging to be unacceptable in the place one must spend 6 hours of every day for 13 critical years of one's development. For the gifted individual, life can be very lonely and complicated. But it need not be that way. With greater societal awareness, understanding, and acceptance, much of the pain and isolation of being gifted can be healed.

Parallels Between Giftedness and Retardation

There are many lessons to be learned about giftedness from a close examination of the way we view the other end of the intellectual spectrum (Zigler & Farber, 1985). If giftedness were to be recognized as the mirror image of retardation it would provide an entirely new perspective. Society recognizes retardation as an organizing principle—a unique trajectory of development with atypical characteristics.

No one imagines that retardation affects only learning rate; however, many believe that the gifted are just like everyone else except that they learn faster. Like retardation, giftedness is a different ground that affects all of life's experiences. Just as developmental delay has a lifelong impact on all aspects of social and emotional development, academic achievement, home life, response of the community, and career goals, so does developmental advancement permeate *all* facets of a person's life in childhood and adulthood.

Developmentally advanced and developmentally delayed children are both asynchronous: their development (e.g., cognitive vs. physical development) is markedly uneven. They are out-of-sync with age mates and expectations of society for their age group. The more they veer in either direction from the norm, the greater the asynchrony, both internally (in terms of the unevenness of their development) and externally (in terms of their ability to fit in with age mates). Cognitive and emotional complexity also vary as a function of the degree of difference from the norm in either direction. Profoundly gifted and profoundly retarded children have a very difficult time learning the art of dishonesty, which we will discuss at greater length. Both groups must be compared *with their own group rather than with societal norms*.

When we look at the normal curve of intelligence, we see that the vast majority of the population (68%) is within one standard deviation of 100 IQ. Each standard deviation in either direction puts the child at risk for peer rejection and a lack of fit with the rate of learning in the regular classroom. Students whose abilities fall between one and two standard deviations below the norm (nearly 14%) are considered “slow learners”; they usually receive remedial services throughout their school career. They are also slow in picking up jokes and in other social interactions. At 2 standard deviations below the norm (approximately 70 IQ), children qualify for special education. A little over 2% of the population is considered to have social and emotional, as well as academic, needs so clearly differentiated from the norm that they are protected by federal and state mandates. There is a continuum of services depending upon whether a child’s abilities fall in the mildly, moderately, severely, or profoundly delayed range. Yet, children who are 2, 3, 4, even 5 standard deviations above the norm, are often placed in regular classrooms with no modifications of any kind, and no recognition of the differences in their social and emotional needs (Silverman, 1993b).

It is interesting that no other exceptionality but the gifted is challenged to live up to its potential, nor is the rationale for funding based on the population’s potential to contribute to society. Parents of gifted children often tell me they “used to be gifted,” but I’ve never met a person who used to be retarded. Our lack of understanding of the psychological, social and emotional aspects of giftedness comes from our over-reliance on achievement models of giftedness.

An Alternative Definition of Giftedness

Nearly all of the models of giftedness, from Sir Frances Galton’s *Hereditary Genius* in 1869 to present views, focus on achievement or the potential for achievement. Our attention is called to what individuals can *do* rather than on who they *are* in their totality. This perspective diminishes our capacity to grasp the dynamic inner experience of the gifted.

Achievement, particularly recognized individual achievement, is culturally determined (Silverman, 1996). In some cultures, individuals shun personal recognition;

instead, they value moral courage or collective prosperity for generations to come, and use their gifts for the good of the group.

Another way of understanding giftedness is to see it as developmental advancement. In every culture, there are children who develop at a faster pace from early childhood on, are inquisitive to a greater degree than their age-mates, generalize concepts earlier than their peers, demonstrate advanced verbal or spatial capacities at an early age, have superb memories, grasp abstract concepts, love to learn, have a sophisticated sense of humor, prefer complexity, are extraordinarily insightful, have a passion for justice, are profoundly aware, and experience life with great intensity. While these traits may or may not propel the individual to world renown, they appear to correlate with moral sensitivity in childhood (Silverman, 1994) and ethical development in adult life. Their sensitivity, intensity, awareness, and, often, their moral courage set these individuals apart.

In 1991, the Columbus Group offered a definition of giftedness that highlights the complexity of the individual's thought process, the intensity of sensation, emotion, and imagination, and the extraordinary awareness that results from this fusion. Asynchrony also involves uneven development and feeling out-of-step with societal norms. Giftedness defined as asynchronous development is phenomenological rather than utilitarian; it focuses on the inner world of gifted children, and stresses their vulnerability in society, rather than their usefulness to society.

Giftedness is **asynchronous development** in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (The Columbus Group, 1991)

Asynchrony literally means out-of-sync, and gifted children are out-of-sync both internally and externally. Internal asynchrony is due to differences in rates of physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and skill development in the gifted child. Uneven development is mirrored in external adjustment difficulties since the gifted person often feels different from, or out of place with, others. External asynchrony, then, is the lack of fit of the gifted child with other same-aged children and with the age-related expectations of the culture.

Uneven development is a universal characteristic of giftedness. Gifted children, in any cultural milieu, have greater discrepancies among various facets of their development than average children (Silverman, 1993a; 1994). The clearest example of this unevenness is the rate at which mental development outstrips physical development. Binet constructed the *mental age* as a means of capturing the degree to which a child's mental abilities differ from those of other children his or her chronological age (Binet & Simon, 1908). The concept of mental age has proved enormously helpful in our

understanding of retardation. We recognize the inherent difficulties of having a 17-year-old body with a 9-year-old mind. However, we still do not understand that it is equally problematic to have a 17-year-old mind trapped in the body of a 9 year old. This type of asynchrony doesn't arouse much sympathy.

A child's mental age predicts the amount of knowledge he or she has mastered, the rate at which the child learns, sophistication of play, age of true peers, maturity of the child's sense of humor, ethical judgment, and awareness of the world. In contrast, chronological age predicts the child's height, physical coordination, handwriting speed, emotional needs, and social skills. The greater the degree to which cognitive development outstrips physical development, the more “out-of-sync” the child feels internally, in social relations, and in relation to the school curriculum.

The intelligence quotient, originally named the “mental quotient” by William Stern (1910), is simply the ratio of mental age to chronological age multiplied by 100. Like Stern, Binet never claimed that the IQ test could measure the totality of intelligence. He viewed intelligence as a rich, complex, multifaceted gestalt—a myriad of dynamically interrelated abilities. Emotion and personality also played critical roles in his conception of intellectual ability. He believed that intelligence was highly influenced by the environment, and that it could be improved through appropriate instruction. From Binet's developmental perspective, intelligence is a continuously evolving process, not a static amount of raw material, which stays the same throughout life. Yet, intelligence testing is viewed today as a method of rigidly determining the limits of one's abilities—quite different from Binet's intent. Consistent with Binet's philosophy, the IQ should be seen as a *minimal estimate of asynchrony*—the extent to which cognitive development (mental age) diverges from physical development (chronological age).

Miraca Gross (1993) provides a graphic illustration of how the ratio between mental age and chronological age indicates varying degrees of asynchronous development. A nine-year-old child with an IQ of 135 has a nine-year-old body and a 12-year-old mind, while the extraordinarily gifted child, with an IQ of 170, has a 15-year-old mind. Asynchrony also increases with age. At 6 years old, the child with an IQ of 135 had a mental age of 8, and at 12, the same child will be mentally 16. The child with an IQ score of 170 was four years advanced mentally at the age of 6, and at the age of 12, this child will be eight years older mentally than physically. So asynchrony cannot be thought of as static; it is dynamic, constantly changing.

The situation becomes even more complicated when it is understood that psychologically the child is an *amalgam* of many developmental ages (Tolan, 1989) and may appear to be different ages in different situations:

In terms of development chronological age may be the least relevant piece of information to consider. Kate, with an IQ score of 170, may be six, but she has a "mental age" of ten and a half... Unfortunately, Kate, like every highly gifted child, is an amalgam of many developmental ages. She may be six while riding a bike, thirteen while playing the piano or chess, nine

while debating rules, eight while choosing hobbies and books, five (or three) when asked to sit still. How can such a child be expected to fit into a classroom designed around norms for six year olds? (p. 7)

This was published three years before the new definition came out. Another precursor was a letter Kathi Kearney (1992) received from a parent:

At 14 [Max] can display a ferocious insistence for justice with the passions and tenacity of a 3-year-old...this gets confusing! We were told that at age 9 he displayed "cognitive reasoning skills way beyond his years." I wish he came with a blinking sign on his forehead to let me know just who I am dealing with: the 3-year-old, the 14-year-old, or the 25-year-old.

Last summer an ill-placed golf ball landed in the bedroom of a house adjoining a picturesque lighthouse. (Remind me to ask how this boy could ignore the physics of playing golf in a densely populated suburban neighborhood.) ...I heard myself asking Max, again and again, "What were you thinking?"

That's the thing--they think when you least expect them to, and go blank at the most inopportune times. My guess is that it's the tension of being caught between all those ages I just mentioned. But I don't think my theory would be supported in a textbook, even though I live by it every day in order to give some organized definition to what's going on. (Estes, 1992, cited in Kearney, 1992, pp. 1, 8).

Defining giftedness as asynchrony is *less likely to invite envy*. Asynchrony is not a competitive concept. More asynchrony is not better. Asynchrony is gaining in popularity because it offers a pathway to understanding the inner experience of the gifted. It reminds us that gifted children are vulnerable and at-risk, and that we are obliged to respond to their differences with supportive parenting, teaching and counseling.

Extreme Asynchrony

There is still another form of asynchrony that needs to be mentioned: the condition of dual exceptionality. The most asynchronous child is one who is both highly gifted and learning disabled. A remarkable number of gifted children have either recognized or undetected learning disabilities, such as auditory processing weaknesses (Silverman, 1989), writing disabilities (Silverman, 1991), visual perception difficulties, spatial disorientation, dyslexia, and attentional deficits (Lovecky, 1991). Giftedness masks disabilities and disabilities depress IQ scores, so that the child appears average (Silverman, 1989). The subtlest scatter of gifted children with learning disabilities clearly demonstrates their asynchrony. The greater the developmental asynchrony, the greater

the strength of the overexcitabilities. Highly gifted children with learning disabilities tend to be extremely overexcitable.

Overexcitabilities

Heightened intensity is the heart of the Columbus Group definition. Cognitive complexity gives rise to emotional depth and intensity. Thus, the gifted not only *think* differently from their peers, they also *feel* differently. This intensity may be experienced in many ways.

Dabrowski and Piechowski (1977) described five channels of heightened experience or “overexcitabilities” (OEs): psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual, and emotional. The overexcitabilities can be thought of as an abundance of physical, sensual, creative, intellectual and emotional energy, which cause inner turmoil, but can result in creative endeavors as well as advanced emotional and ethical development in adulthood. Individuals endowed with greater capacity for vivid imagery, intellectual curiosity, compassion and empathy are more likely to experience anguish when faced with knowledge of the cruelty in the world. A young child who has heightened emotions coupled with advanced cognitive awareness of the suffering and perils in the world feels helpless and afraid.

Psychomotor OE refers to excess physical energy, workaholism, nervous habits (such as tics and nailbiting), rapid speech, love of movement, impulsivity and pressure for action. Aesthetic appreciation is a function of acute sensitivity and capacity of discrimination of one or more of the senses. In addition to responsiveness of the senses and aesthetic appreciation, Sensual OE also includes heightened sensuality and sexuality, and enjoyment at being the center of attention. Imaginal OE is the capacity to visualize events very well, inventiveness, creativity, fantasy, and poetic, dramatic or artistic abilities.

Kathy Courchene, a counselor of the gifted in Atlanta, Georgia, wrote this to me in a letter many years ago:

I am an artist not because of what I may or may not produce, but because of the way in which I see. As I look at the world around me, I am always aware of patterns, of contrasts, of line and mass. I make art in my mind, as I perceive certain things visually and translate them...Right now, I am content with my internal life as an artist, and am at peace with my view that what an artist is lies inside, not in what is produced outside.

Intellectual OE includes probing questions, analytical thinking, reflectiveness, problem solving, interest in abstraction and theory. Emotional OE involves intense connectedness with others, the ability to experience things deeply, fears of death, embarrassment and guilt, and emotional responsiveness. Empathy is a handicap in a world that is blind to cruelty and apathetic to injustice.

A few years ago, I constructed this list of OEs for 9 year olds in Lockport, NY:

The Kids' Guide to Overexcitabilities

Psychomotor Overexcitability

- You have lots of energy
- You love movement
- You love fast games
- You talk a lot
- You can't sit still
- You bite your nails

Sensual Overexcitability

- You love to touch things
- You love food
- You love music
- You love sunsets
- You love shopping
- You hate label to your clothes

Imaginational Overexcitability

- You can picture things vividly
- You have a great sense of humor
- You like to invent things
- You love fantasy
- You worry a lot
- You like to stretch the truth

Intellectual Overexcitability

- You are very curious
- You love to read
- You love learning
- You want everything to be fair
- You can concentrate for long periods
- You always want to be right

Emotional Overexcitability

- You care a lot about other people
- You love animals
- You are very sensitive
- You try to be and do your best
- You are easily frustrated
- You are shy and nervous sometimes

I was surprised at how well adults related to the same list.

The presence of OEs naturally leads to potential for higher-level development in adult life. They may be difficult to live with in children, but they are the essential ingredients in the development of creative, passionate, morally aware adults. The marriage of cognitive complexity and emotional intensity, and the enhanced awareness and moral sensitivity born of that marriage, render gifted individuals vulnerable. When advanced cognition brings information into awareness for which the child or adult is emotionally unprepared, vulnerability is the natural result. But we must be careful not to equate emotional fragility with immaturity. Most of the world's treasures are delicate and need to be handled with care, like fine china, crystal, paintings, roses, orchids, and children. All delicacy is at risk in crude and aggressive environments. It is the *vulnerability* of the gifted that requires special provisions.

Complexity, intensity, and heightened awareness are lifelong attributes of the gifted. These qualities often result in extraordinary conscience, a need to make the gift of life mean something in the overall pattern of existence. Lost potential to be an artist or a great scientist or statesman is surely harmful to the individual and to society, but loss of courage to take a stand against injustice causes much deeper suffering in these sensitive souls.

It is clear that not all gifted individuals reach adulthood with their sensitivity intact. It takes great courage to experience the depth of one's emotions in an insensitive society. Some gifted children who show profound emotional and moral sensitivity in their early years seem to lose these capacities somewhere along the way. Lovecky (1994) writes:

To continue with the generous, compassionate and altruistic responses of early childhood places many gifted boys at considerable risk for peer rejection and ridicule. They are too vulnerable this way, so they often conceal the moral side of themselves behind the same invulnerability modeled for them by others; that is, they wall off and deny compassionate responses to others. (p. 3)

Dabrowski (1979/1994) found morally and emotionally advanced adults gentle, delicate, nonaggressive, likely to withdraw rather than retaliate, "heroic" in their sensitivity. He felt that because of their sensitivity and integrity, these individuals are capable of bringing humanity to a higher set of values, but that they are at great risk of being destroyed by society because of their inherent differences. The values Dabrowski considered indispensable to harmonious living include: an empathic attitude toward others, tolerance (not aggression), responsibility for others and for self, a just attitude (treating everybody by the same standards), helping each other, giving though to the harmed and humiliated, to invalids, to the sick, to the ineffectual and those devastated by their own loneliness, truthfulness, authenticity, and just social care.

Conclusion

The asynchrony that besets the gifted is both a blessing and a curse. If we view giftedness only within a competitive framework, then the most gifted among us are certainly the most cursed, because they cannot fit into society as it currently is, nor can they succeed by its standards. They are likely to be seen as defective in today's world; they lack the competitive drive to win and they cannot comfortably “play the game” at school or work, ignoring the power plays and moral infractions. Advanced, asynchronous development is not an advantage in a race toward personal gain. It does not give the individual an edge in the competition. Rather, the cognitive and personality traits that comprise giftedness are disadvantages in a society in which those differences are not valued.

We need to see beyond the narrow lens of competitiveness to grasp the deeper significance of giftedness. When we look at the gifted from a global perspective, it is clear that the development of each person's gifts benefits all of society. Every human being has a unique contribution to make to the whole. Kierkegaard has been quoted as saying that we all come into this world with “sealed orders” and we each must discover what those orders are and follow them (Tolan, 1995). Everyone's orders are different. What is the point of competing if we all have a different role to play? Gifted individuals come equipped with the exact combination of unusual strengths and weaknesses—the perfect asynchrony—to fulfill their own sealed orders.

A similar thought was expressed by Gary Zukav in *Thoughts from the Seat of the Soul*.

Before it incarnates, each soul enters into a sacred contract with the universe to accomplish certain things. It enters into this commitment in the fullness of its being. Whatever the task that your soul has agreed to, all the experiences in your life serve to awaken within you the memory of that contract, and to prepare you to fulfill it.

We, too, who have been called to help these children develop, have been given very sacred orders of our own. We know that some of the children in our care have come to lead us to a more humane, harmonious existence. We who cherish gifted children have been entrusted with guiding and guarding the future of our planet. With our help, these children's gifts will become blessings to themselves and to the Universe.

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NOTE:

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