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**THE TALENT OF BEING INCONVENIENT:  
ON THE SOCIETAL FUNCTIONS OF GIFTEDNESS**

(Paper presented at the 18<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children,  
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### **Abstract**

Certain highly gifted individuals are not allowed to flourish and develop although they exist in environments which have the means to assist and stimulate their development. There appear to exist gifted individuals in our midst whom we tend ignore systematically; gifted men and women who simply are “inconvenient.” In an effort to explain such social responses to gifted behaviors a socio-biological framework is proposed, as based on a taxonomy of social function. Empirical data from three different studies ( $N = 287$ ,  $IQ \geq 131$ ,  $M = 34$  years of age), all of which demonstrated the resistance that gifted individuals encounter in their daily lives, will be used to exemplify the socio-biological framework.

**Keywords:** Gifted function, gifted and society, marginalization, stigmatization, taxonomy, socio-biology.

## Introduction

You need *permission, courage and resilience* to be gifted (Freeman, 2005; Landau, 1990; Shekerjian, 1990), because “along with the promise of potential,” as Fiedler (1999) concludes in an extensive review of the socio-emotional difficulties of gifted individuals, “come the problems of potential—problems that are often a direct effect of differing from the norm in ways that others are not necessarily prepared to deal with” (p. 434).

Visual artists and Western classical composers are good historical examples. When having introduced new ideas, they were ridiculed as a rule by their own immediate social context; so much so it has established a well-known principle: if you are a talented composer or painter expect to be mocked and ridiculed whilst alive and productive, and later exalted and praised when passed-away and gone (cf. Machlis, 1979; Shaughnessy & Manz, 1991).

Similarly, most of the prestigious MacArthur Award winners, from a variety of fields of endeavor, have encountered much the same fate when deviating too much in thinking or doing. Shekerjian (1990), interviewed 40 of them and concluded that “society shuns its heretics” (p. 16-17). The difficulty in gaining acceptance for new, and often probably better, ideas and testable theories in the academic world has always been infamously difficult (Seegerstråle, 2000).

In a more practical setting of corporate work, David Willings—a personnel management expert and scholar—offers a few typical statements as told by senior managers of intellectually gifted individuals being part of their workforce: “Why do we hire these intellectuals? They're no damned use. They don't fit in. They cause trouble”, and further “we had a very gifted young chap. He came up with two ideas which we have unashamedly stolen. But he never learned to follow normal procedure ... He left us after seven months and I think it for the best” (as quoted in Kelly-Streznewski, 1999; p. 132).

Intuitively we would often argue that being gifted is surely something positive and much welcomed in an ambitious but also troubled world. It would certainly seem, however, that at least in some social contexts the very opposite is true: being gifted is always difficult at best and more like a curse, difficult to handle, at its worse (Brackmann, 2008; Fiedler, 1999; Kelly-Streznewski, 1999; Kreger-Silverman, 1993; Landau, 1990). Lacking still in the literature is a theoretical framework by which to understand how giftedness in response to the social context becomes a potentially self-destructive stigma rather than something self-actualizing and productive developing into a societal asset.

This, then, is the aim of this paper: to propose such a framework, drawing from socio-biological research, which may help explain why and when highly gifted individuals are likely to be considered inconvenient and ignored or promoted and highly esteemed (Persson, 2009).

Two case descriptions are in place, as told to me by two astoundingly multi-gifted and very sociable individuals. The first is a Canadian male (A), now in his 40s, deemed the most likely student ever at his former university to become a Nobel Prize Laureate, but who was prevented from pursuing a further academic career by a few influential academics at his university. The other case is British male (B), also in his 40s, an athlete, a visual artist and a very creative computer engineer, currently struggling for recognition in the world of Information Technology, often against corporate efforts, which are trying to streamline him to “fit in” even with the help of organizational psychologists. This is what they had to say in a casual exchange of words (both personal communications 9 May and 8 April 2009 respectively):

A. I have big problems fitting in ... Most people have simply been totally co-opted by the status quo ... yes, you and I, work within all that, but we explicitly rebel via words and deeds ... kind of like the brave warrior who runs forward to get mowed down .. while the cowards stand in the pack .. the status quo .. I guess bravely being mowed down is perhaps stupid from a survival sense ... but in terms of idealism it is the ultimate sacrifice ... but for what end?? Constant suffering on the way to being mowed down for idealism? Then not even a statue in memory being built by those who were offended by the status quo rebels? Either way ... we're pretty much overall screwed. All we can do is maybe take solace in that we saw the [fakes, the hypocrisy and the problems they caused] and tried not to clothe ourselves in it like most do.

B. You have the same problem as me. With the geeks, I'm not a geek. I train [in a gym], yet I am not [one of the gym guys] or that kind of thing. I'm in all categories, yet fit into none of them. If you look at the social characteristics of each [of whom you meet, you always appear to them as unusual; taking on a different role than they do, but] it makes you an *individual*, and that in itself is a rare thing not to have total sheep mentality.

### *A socio-biological framework for the social function of giftedness*

The research effort so far in giftedness and talent studies has focused on understanding developmental processes, neurological and social factors underlying giftedness and of course educational means by which to optimize and encourage the development of giftedness and talent. But, as far as I know, the question of social function has not been addressed. We tend to take for granted that giftedness will always be welcomed on all societal levels and that the gifted automatically will start contributing to society (cf. Teo., & Quah, 1999). However, where gifted individuals pose a *perceived* threat to power structures and authority, at whatever societal level and context, they are very likely to be considered unwanted and inconvenient (cf. Quinn, 2004). Note that to be perceived as a threat is *not* the same as intentionally being one.

It is essential in studying giftedness, "that we are aware of the more primitive action and reaction patterns that determine our behavior, and to not pretend as if they did not exist. It is especially in the area of social behavior that we are less free to act than we

generally assume” (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989, p. 3). Of particular interest in explaining social response to giftedness is *dominance behavior* through aggression, and especially the defense and conquest of territory; the assertion of dominance within well-organized groups, and disciplinary action used to enforce the rules of a group (Wilson, 2004). Aggression is more multi-faceted than we are usually aware of. In addition, it is largely a function with biological determinants (Kemp, 1990; McBride-Dabbs & Goodwin-Dabbs, 2000). We defend intellectual territories also if our position of influence and authority is understood as dependent on it. The resistance of many a scientist to change their minds from the old and to the new, even in the face of convincing evidence contrary to their convictions is well known (Segestråle, 2000) This has been termed *cognitive conservatism* by Greenwald (1980), and is understood by him as a defense mechanism. Though, some are prone to resist change more than others (Johnson, *et al.*, 1988). If this observation holds, then the adversaries of the gifted making their way in world may well be other gifted individuals; presumably lesser gifted, who have already arrived at some level of importance.

Perceived threats are handled by humans and other animals alike in four ways: 1) Posturing, 2) Submission, 3) Escape or 4) Attack and Elimination (cf. Barnard, 2004; Grossman, 1995). Our first choice is generally not to eliminate the threat posed by another individual. It is rather to scare him or her off by demonstrating superiority in a variety ways (posturing). If this is successful and we are convinced of the opposing “greater strength” we may choose to escape; to simply leave in order to seek safety elsewhere. However, we may resort to forming liaisons instead. It is better to be friend and ally to perceived superiority rather than to be its enemy (submission). As a last resort we attack and eliminate, with the ultimate purpose of once and for all ridding ourselves of the threat. Needless to say, this has been done in many ways in all cultures and in all societies and on all levels throughout history.

***Preliminary research data***

To this end a series of studies were launched of 287 academically gifted individuals. There were 71 women and 216 men; their average age was 34 and all had scored IQ 131 and above on the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test.

The first study showed that these individuals were very socially aware and interested; that they were highly empathic and very concerned with matters of justice and fairness. They also tended to have relationship problems (50%) and many of them had had depressive periods during which they even considered suicide (32%). The participants of the study did not see themselves as having much impact on society and societal development although some of them held positions of political leadership, research and higher education or did charitable work (Persson, 2007).

The second study found that these individuals were far from satisfied at work, with one exception: gifted individuals in upper-level management and the ones running their own businesses were indeed very satisfied with their professional careers (ie. 25% of the research group). All other participants suffered four different kinds of problems as employees (Persson, in press, a):

- a) Limited work satisfaction because of unsuitable or non-challenging tasks,
- b) Limited work satisfaction because of unsuitable management,
- c) Working with people of unequal competence, and
- d) Resignation and alienation at work

The third study found that the research group had suffered horribly in primary and secondary education. As they reached college and university their experience of education became more suitable to a gifted mind. However, note that more than half of them (65%) also found higher education unbearable. To be gifted, knowledgeable and insightful, more so than



many of their professors, was often not welcome in colleges and universities. It needs to be said though, that in Sweden, where this research was done, education is highly egalitarian on all levels, albeit more so in compulsory school than at university level (Persson, in press, b).

These three studies, in different ways, suggest that the permission of the social context certainly is an important aspect of understanding gifted development as well as the socio-emotional status of the gifted. The individuals of these studies were exceedingly resourceful, keen to help, socially aware, motivated by fairness, empathy and had a considerable social pathos. Yet their skills, insights and ambitions were generally ignored and shunned rather welcomed and accepted. They were in many ways a liability to the societal system. In line with socio-biological tenets, permission to be gifted is not likely to be given if an individual is perceived as a potential threat.

Giftedness as a construct is invariably two issues combined: A cognitive hardware and a social response to it. It follows that if there is social significance awarded to giftedness, then giftedness also has a socio-biological function and a taxonomy of gifted behaviors as social functions is needed. I have therefore proposed the following (Table 1):

**Table 1.** *The socio-biological functions of giftedness and talent*

<b>Social function</b>	<b>Popular label</b>	<b>Universal social response</b>
Maintenance	The nerd	Acceptance and promotion
Entertainment	The hero	Acceptance and promotion
Change	The martyr	Resistance and persecution

### ***Societal maintenance***

A first social function needs to reasonably be a *maintenance function*. Societal institutions and markets alike need problem-solvers and facilitators for continued profit and

welfare. Among them are scientists, engineers, health care staff, product developers, industrial designers, and so on. In a socio-biological perspective they indirectly maintain societal structures by inventions, refinements, and improvements within the domain of production in which they are active. Their effort gives a society the ability to attain or maintain welfare and perhaps also strengthen existing power hierarchies in a larger perspective.

### ***Societal entertainment***

A second social function is *societal entertainment*. It fills an important and much appreciated function to a great many people worldwide in various ways. These are the “heroes” we love and admire. They often become role models, willingly or unwillingly, for many who wish to become like them. To associate with them strengthens our sense of identity (Klapp, 1962; 1969), or at times allow for individuals with a relatively poor Self-image to bask in their glory (Cialdini *et al.*, 1976). Alternatively, these individuals may help to achieve a cathartic experience by means of, for example, a sport event or a concert (see Lorentz, 1966; Russel, 1999).

If so, no wonder that gifted individuals offering the best possible entertainment are promoted, popular, and are amongst the highest paid individuals in modern societies. They are popular musicians, actors, footballers, ice hockey players, popular writers, visual artists, and so on. Their skills are highly regarded and usually highly rewarded. From a socio-biological perspective, these individuals rarely present a challenge to societal structures and existing power hierarchies. Quite the opposite, they help maintain stability by diverting people’s attention from other and perhaps more critical matters concerned with, for example, unemployment, financial crises, equal opportunities, social welfare, education, discrimination, individual rights, and so on. Depending on the society in which they live, issues such as these may affect their daily lives dramatically in everything but a positive way. Hence, they need a

means to escape. Entertainment is of course a form of escape from the daily stress of life, evoking dreams of an alternative and perhaps better reality, by offering a moment of excitement and thrill (Baumeister, 1991)..

### ***Societal change***

The gifted having the potential to achieve change at any level of society stand out amongst the other social functions of gifted behavior. Stigmatization, marginalization and persecution are frequent phenomena in this context (see Crocker & Quinn, 2003; Hall, Stevens & Meleis, 1994). Above all, when by their knowledge and insight, they publicly expose flaws and incompetence in social systems, they immediately pose a threat to the dominance of a certain individual or group of individuals, especially so for individuals who have personal gains to make if systems remain unchanged. Through history these gifted individuals have often been termed *martyrs*. They are mainly individuals who are, in various ways, victimized in a group, large or small. In spite of their altruistic intentions, dominant individuals are very likely to interpret their potential to cause social change as a threat to their own dominance. No position of dominance in a social structure will be abandoned lightly anywhere, and when threatened it will be defended. Only the means by which positions are defended will differ depending on the available culture-based control system. The allure of gaining power and influence is presumably and equally strong everywhere, in all groups, and at all levels of society. It is indeed an intrinsically human characteristic.

### **Conclusion**

Like all social beings also the gifted and talented develop in response to their social context, and it is of course possible that many take on all of these three functions at different times in their lives irrespective of their domains of giftedness. However, while the social functions of

maintenance and entertainment, as a whole, are relatively neutral in terms of social change and therefore also causing less of an adverse response, the gifted individuals who choose to focus directly on societal change are also the ones evoking the greatest resistance. Nelson Mandela (1991) was an inconvenience to the South African political leadership during Apartheid rule, and so were Andrei Sakharov (1991) to the former Soviet Union and Vaclav Havel (1985) to former Czechoslovakia. Gifted individuals prompting social change are still under persecution—and differently so depending on the cultures and political systems in which they are active. They are anything but neutral and remain an inconvenience, for socio-biological reasons, also under democratic rule.

It is worth noting too—at least this is my observation—that almost all research into giftedness and talent is focused on the social functions of maintenance and entertainment. Not on societal change. This should be compared to how we often outline the personality traits typical of the gifted. They certainly are fair, empathic and socially concerned, but—and perhaps often because of this—they tend also to be rebellious often questioning rules and authority. They are also critical, perfectionist, independent and non-conforming, inquisitive and tend to ask embarrassing questions (Silverman, 1993; Sternberg & Tardiff, 1988; Webb, 1993). As Winner (1996) puts it: they are risk-takers with a desire to shake things up. Most of all they have the desire to set things straight, “to alter the status quo and shake up established tradition. Creators do not accept the prevailing view. They are oppositional and discontented” (p. 276).

It seems to me, that while researchers have observed what the gifted do, how they do it, and what their characteristics are, we have yet to put this knowledge into a framework by which we can also understand the social repercussions of being gifted. What good does it do if we provide excellent educational provision and the gifted and talented later in professional life are ignored and considered “inconvenient”? We have forgotten that the

gifted often, if not always, are by their very nature, fairly “politically incorrect”. A socio-biological framework provides a suitable basis for this line of study.

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