Warts and Rainbows: Issues in the Psychotherapy of the Gifted

Deirdre V. Lovecky

Deirdre V. Lovecky, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Providence, Rhode Island. Her provocative article, Can You Hear the Flowers Singing? Issues for Gifted Adults, published in the Journal of Counseling and Development, provided the basis for the model described in this article.

ABSTRACT: This article is an attempt to generate a set of hypotheses about gifted people and their interactions with others, about the social/emotional issues gifted adults face, and about how these issues impact on self-esteem and on interpersonal relationships. These hypotheses are intended to generate a thoughtful and open dialogue with gifted psychotherapy clients about the fact of their giftedness and its impact on their lives. Specific therapeutic issues also are explored in the context of the social/emotional development of the gifted person.

Psychotherapy with gifted adults can be a mixed blessing. It can seem as if the gifted person is under a wicked spell and no one can see beyond the frog self to the enchanted prince or princess beneath. The therapist who works with gifted people needs an inventory of counterspells and disenchantments to teach the gifted how to love themselves and value their special talents.

Psychotherapy with the gifted is not easy. When working with a more average client, I am surprised every so often at how much easier things are without constant questioning of my premises or of my ability to understand accurately. Because the basis of accurate empathy is accurate understanding, failures of empathy occur many more times with gifted clients than with more average ones. But, conversely, there are also more moments of shared understanding and mutual trust. The therapist has to have the insight, the stamina, and a certain amount of self-knowledge to avoid the pitfalls that working with highly gifted clients can entail.

Background

Specific social/emotional issues of gifted adults have been given little attention in the literature. A number of longitudinal studies indicate that the early advantage many gifted children had in educational progress leads to good adult
adjustment. Terman's studies suggested that gifted children grow up to become people of superior vocational achievement, generally satisfied with themselves and with their lives (Oden, 1968; Terman & Oden, 1947). Nevertheless, being gifted by no means made these adults immune to problems in daily living (Sears, 1977; Sears & Barbee, 1977).

The literature on psychotherapy with gifted adults is sparse. Their problems are rarely seen as issues related to giftedness; problems that might be associated with being gifted as a child are expected to disappear with the onset of adulthood. Perhaps that reflects the thinking of society to some extent: There are gifted children, but only eminent adults. The literature that does exist (Alvarado, 1989; Dunn, 1987; Lassen, 1988; Lovecky, 1986; Miller, 1981; Noble, 1989; Prout, 1988; Silverman & Ellsworth, 1980; Willings, 1985) suggests that a number of issues continue to cause problems for gifted adults. Underlying the various descriptions in the literature is a suggestion that both the fact of being gifted, and therefore different from the norm, and the intensification of various personality traits that accompany this difference may be the factors that determine good or poor social/emotional adjustment.

A number of traits or characteristics have been associated with giftedness. No two authors describe exactly the same traits, and even among traits that are similar, there has been little consistency in describing behavior related to that trait. In addition, most authors have ignored the social and emotional aspects. For example, how does a sensitive person behave, and what are the social consequences of the behavior? Piechowski (1986) has suggested that certain modes of mental functioning may not be socially valued because their behavioral expression may cause discomfort in others. People may interpret these imaginative, intellectual, and emotional “overactivitites” as less than good social/emotional adjustment in gifted people.

An earlier article (Lovecky, 1986) hypothesized five traits that appeared to be associated with giftedness: divergent thinking ability, excitability, sensitivity, perceptiveness, and entelechy. These traits have both positive and negative social/emotional impact, and thus, are related to degree of perceived adjustment.

The original study was based on observations of 15 gifted adults who were colleagues, friends, acquaintances, and psychotherapy clients. The current expansion includes information from a much larger sample of 80 gifted adults, ranging in age from 21 to 83 years; about 40% were men, and 60%, women. Of the 38 who were psychotherapy clients, 19 were seen in individual psychotherapy and 19 in family therapy with their children. Identification of giftedness was based on a variety of criteria including reported intellectual potential of 130 or higher, scores on achievement testing, SAT's, GRE's, Miller Analogy Scores, current professional achievement, or achievement of national recognition including prizes or awards. Some of the gifted adults remembered having participated in gifted programs as children or were accelerated learners.

Anecdotal and observational data were gathered in the form of journal notes and correspondence with a number of gifted adults. These data served to delineate five traits. Biographical material of well-known, eminent people—particularly as examples that exemplify certain aspects of the five traits — was also used. More refined research methodology, as opposed to this more intuitive approach based on observations, will undoubtedly provide more elaborate elucidation of the impact of giftedness on the lives of those concerned.

Several of these traits may exist in any individual, although which ones predominate, and whether the manifestations are more positive or more negative, may vary across individuals. The traits themselves are neutral, but their behavioral manifestations give them their social/emotional significance and suggest others’ perception of them as personal strengths or weaknesses. In any individual the sum of the behavioral manifestations will be viewed as more positive or more negative, and the person as more or less well adjusted.

Gifted people in therapy may reveal difficulties with one or more of the traits. The degree of intensity of the behavior, as well as its specific manifestations, have to be considered—particularly those manifestations that relate to self-esteem and to a sense of connectedness to others. To clarify which issues may result from particular aspects of each trait, the traits are described as if only one predominates; however, the traits overlap to some degree, and most gifted people seem to display more than one.

**Trait Descriptions**

**Divergent Thinking Ability**

A preference for unusual, original, and creative responses is characteristic of divergent thinkers. Further, two types seem to be (a) those whose divergent thinking is circumscribed to certain times and subjects, and (b) those who are primary process thinkers and fantasize much of the time. Lynn and Rhue (1988) identified 2.6% of their 6,000 subjects as extreme fantasizers. Creativity was a special strength of this group.

Divergent thinkers are often high achievers in adulthood, innovative in a number of fields, task-committed, self-starting, highly independent individuals who use their capacity for innovation and imagination to enhance their emotional well-being. Theoretical scientists, writers, artists, composers, and philosophers are divergent thinkers. Einstein, Mozart, Thoreau, and the French Impressionists are all examples of gifted adults successful in using their divergent thinking abilities.

**Issues Related to Divergent Thinking Ability**

How other people perceive divergently thinking gifted adults depends on how the gifted adult has managed to deal with both the positive and negative feelings accrued in childhood. It also depends on the situation itself. For example, if the gifted person has learned what social situations to avoid, and has found situations that validate divergent thinking in positive ways, the person's behavior
reflects a more positive aspect of this trait. Thus, a highly creative person who
cannot turn off divergent thought probably will be a misfit in the usual corporate
middle-management structure, where conformity to the company norm is em-
phasized, but the same person would be an asset in a think tank or entrepreneur
situation. How well the adult has learned to find situations that are good fits is
important to developing good self-esteem.

Divergent thinking ability has positive social and emotional value in itself.
Gifted adults with this trait are often able to find creative solutions to a wide
variety of problems, including interpersonal problems. They are the idea people,
the theorists, those whose thinking can fundamentally change the way we view
reality itself, as, for example, Copernicus, Newton, and Einstein did. In the right
situation, these gifted adults foster a sense of challenge and enthusiasm in others.
They find deep personal satisfaction in new ideas. Freud, for example, found
great satisfaction in solving the puzzle he had set for himself of trying to under-
stand his patients' behavior and symptoms. In doing so, he revolutionized much of
how society views the later effects of childhood experiences (Stone, 1971).

Divergent thinkers challenge stereotypes. Because they unbalance the
status quo, they bring courage and determination to the lives of others who use
their examples to break the bonds of conformity and prejudice themselves. For
instance, Woody Guthrie, through his folk songs, set the tone for development of
a stronger labor movement during the 1930s and 1940s. His songs did much to
inspire and support the struggles of workers and led to reforms that protect the
rights of workers today (Klein, 1980).

On the more negative side, divergent thinkers encounter difficulty in
situations where group consensus is important. Though they may work well with
compatible people, they often do not work well for someone else. Divergent
thinkers tend to be dedicated to their own ideas and have difficulty supporting
the ideas of others. They are not "good team players." The usual office politics
seem a waste of time. Divergent thinkers seem not to understand the idea of
prestige based on whom one knows or how much money someone has. Money
and social position are just not very important to them.

Most job situations are not able to accommodate highly original thinkers.
Einstein, for example, did not rise far within the hierarchy of the patent office
(Clark, 1971). In fact, the person who thinks of a new and better way to do
something is not rewarded in the office any more than he or she was rewarded for
that behavior on the playground. In many jobs, going beyond one's job
description is anathema; the creative worker who gives more than the rest, works
longer hours, or tries to do the best possible job is frequently not admired by
co-workers. The usual reward systems may not motivate the divergent adult
either. Just as in childhood, the novelty of an idea, the desire to see what happens,
or the wish to change things may be more rewarding than raises, bonuses, or merit
certificates. Neither the boss nor the co-workers understand this and tend to see
the gifted adult in a negative light.

Therapy Considerations

Many divergent thinkers have trouble trusting in relationships because they
have found so little acceptance for their unique selves. The resulting poor
self-esteem and lack of connectedness to significant others may precipitate
lifelong problems with depression. Sometimes the gifted adult has erected such
a strong false self to hide from others that the original identity has been "forgotten."
In this case, the gifted adult finds that while he or she is accepted by others,
there is an emptiness within. Miller (1981) has described, for example, the
development of one type of false self.

Other gifted adults find that, despite assiduous efforts to maintain a socially
acceptable facade, the divergent thinking mode cannot really be overcome, and
they are neither accepted for their different selves nor seen as conforming to
societal expectations. This no-man's land produces alienation from the self.

Divergently thinking adults also may need to address how others' expecta-
tions influence how they think and act. The old saw, "If you are just yourself,
everyone will like you..." does not apply to these gifted adults. They need to learn
to assess the expectations of others and decide if accommodating to them is
important or not. This depends on the goal of the relationship, how divergent a
thinker the person is, and what the cost of nonconformity will be. Therapists also
have to realize that some divergent thinkers cannot be any different no matter
how hard they try, so managing the environment to maximize rewards and
comfort is more suitable for them than trying to be what they cannot.

In general, the interpersonal dilemma of the divergent thinker is one of
establishing and maintaining a positive identity and good self-esteem in the face
of pressure to conform. To find and mold a suitable social and work environment that nurtures the person, as well as the talents, is the central therapeutic goal for these gifted adults.

Excitability

A high energy level, emotional reactivity, and high arousal of the central nervous system characterize the trait of excitability. All three aspects of the trait are not usually exhibited in one person. Gifted adults with this trait are able to focus their concentration and attention for long periods of time. They have a wide variety of interests and do many things well. They enjoy the excitement of taking risks and meeting challenges. Their high energy level allows them to produce prodigiously whatever most captures their interest. They often pave the way for others to follow with refinements of their innovative ideas. This is what happened to Thomas Edison when Western Union and Bell Telephone used his refinements in telegraphy (Cousins, 1965). Many inventors, explorers, and entrepreneurs are examples of people high in this trait, including Leonardo da Vinci, Amelia Earhart, and Thomas Edison.

Issues Related to Excitability

Growing up experiencing a high energy level or high degree of emotional reactivity, or both, may bring enduring consequences in adulthood. Because the main issue is with self-regulation, the gifted adult may have felt in childhood that the world was an unpredictable and uncomfortable place. The resultant sense of insecurity may remain, so these individuals may never feel quite in control. How these adults are perceived in social situations depends on the degree to which they have learned to stop, listen to others, and modulate their emotional responsiveness. Most people will look askance at an adult who engages in temper tantrums, avoids social interactions, or appears to be overly intense or vulnerable.

The trait of excitability can have positive social and emotional value. The productivity and risk-taking proclivities of these gifted people can lead to the development of new products. They also inspire others to join them in creating their new ventures. All of Edison’s helpers worked long hours willingly, proud to be part of his venture. He inspired loyalty, as well as productivity, by working alongside them and by making the work seem like play (Cousins, 1965).

People high in excitability also have a great deal of energy to spend on a variety of projects and personal concerns. They are the lucky ones who do not have to choose whether to expend energy on work or on self; they have enough to do it all. Because they also tend to work quickly, diligently, and enthusiastically on any venture that interests them, they manage to get a great deal done. Think about all the inventions we owe just to Thomas Edison!

Although emotional reactivity can be somewhat of a problem, being spontaneous about feelings and quick to respond on a feeling level to issues can be positive. Those who care about issues and are unafraid of showing how they feel can focus attention on an issue. How much would get done if polite interest were all that was ever shown? Spontaneity and exuberance are important in drawing others into an idea or project. People who show what they feel can model a vision for others. The intensity of their emotional responses can lead others to think about issues they might otherwise avoid. Also, an emotional response can discharge energy and leave the field clear for action. A person who is intense, dedicated, and likes challenge and risk will see negative events as challenges, not as failures.

On the more negative side, childhood difficulties with self-regulation may remain problematic in adult life. Boredom and the need for novelty and stimulation can produce a habit of aimless activity. Because of their need for novelty, some adults may continue to have trouble following through on details. Habits of procrastination and poor motivation may develop. Others may produce much but feel little reward, either because they leave the project for others to finish or because they are doing so many things that they never stop to take pleasure from the things they have completed. In either case, the satisfaction gained from knowing that one has mastered a difficult task is lost, and self-esteem may continue to suffer.

If, as adolescents, gifted individuals did not allow themselves to finish academic requirements, job satisfaction may be an issue in later adulthood. Although many gifted adults change careers over the course of a lifetime, those who do not have sufficient academic background, who have spent their youths flitting with excitement, and who have not developed habits of completing projects may reach a time when they will have difficulty finding a challenging job.

Gifted adults who easily suffer sensory overload, who are emotionally reactive and intense, may find the social aspects of living difficult. These are “stimulus-withdrawers” — they find stressful the amount of stimulation that most other people find comfortable. They often feel overwhelmed, irritable, and fatigued. Some also have a great deal of trouble turning off thoughts and feelings so that they feel powerful emotions more intensely and for a longer time. Because they have trouble regulating their emotional reactions, others may regard them as immature and lacking in self-control and therefore show little understanding or tolerance. In fact, in most jobs and in many social situations, one’s emotional stability, rather than one’s degree of intelligence, is what counts. Promotions and favors go to individuals others feel comfortable with rather than to those who may be interesting and brilliant but who are regarded as emotional liabilities.

Therapy Considerations

Adults who are high in the trait of excitability often do not realize that the reactions they elicit from others are related to their strong need to take charge of and control things. Because few others think and act as quickly as they do, or take as many interpersonal risks, they tend to distrust the opinions of others and to be less patient with others’ expression of feelings. Often they have trouble being calm in the face of other people’s reactions. If they have not realized that their
behavior can be hard for others to deal with, they may be too demanding, expecting that others should live up to their high standards and the fast pace they set.

Impatient with mistakes, they do not let others work things out for themselves. This can occur in the therapy relationship itself. They may want instant answers, may try to control things too much, or may resist plans designed to help them overcome the habits of procrastination.

For example, one man, who wanted to learn to play the guitar, was unable to practice on his own and also unable to make use of a behavioral plan to help him do so. His great need to be in charge, and at the same time his inability to self-regulate, derailed the attempt.

For many such gifted people, therapy may move too slowly. Short-term work with only one or two specific goals often helps these people focus their energies. Helping them choose creative endeavors, find interesting rewards, and learn to notice and acknowledge the satisfaction gained from attaining a goal can be most helpful. Completing the therapy objectives may be the first goal reached in their lives.

In the case of stimulus withdrawers, recognition of their problems in experiencing too much stimulation from ordinary life events can be helpful. They need to learn to take charge of choices to be made about the environments in which they live and work, and what types and how much stimulation they feel comfortable experiencing through media and books. Learning to turn off anxiety through relaxation, meditation, and thought-stopping techniques can be helpful. Some need to learn to manage a social life that depends on finding a comfortable balance of stimulation and quietude and in which they find relaxation through activities and relationships that allow for individual choice rather than group consensus.

Both groups of gifted adults who are high in excitability should be carefully assessed to rule out residual attention deficit disorder (ADD), as some gifted children and adults high in this trait also may show symptoms of ADD. Some have been able to get through school and accomplish tasks as an adult as long as they limit what they do—for example, spending all their time and energy on their jobs and leaving little for family or friends. The main criteria differentiating the gifted person high in excitability and the gifted ADD person are the ability to sustain and shift attention on a variety of moderately stimulating tasks and the ability to maintain train of thought. Also, questioning the gifted adult about the contents of daydreams can be useful. The ADD gifted adult often is distracted from tasks and focused thought by irrelevant thought content; other gifted adults either maintain focus on the task or daydream about material relevant to the topic.

The dilemma for gifted adults who are high in excitability is whether they can learn to self-regulate, learn to finish tasks while finding some satisfaction in task completion and in their accomplishments rather than in excitement, and learn to overcome the effects of their high energy level and emotional reactivity on others.

## Sensitivity

A depth of feeling that results in a sense of identification with others (people, animals, nature, the universe) characterizes the trait of sensitivity. Passion and compassion are two different aspects of sensitivity. Passion refers to the depth of feeling that many gifted adults experience. This depth colors all life experiences and brings an intensity and complexity to the individual's personality. Passion is also part of creative endeavors. It is like living in a world of many hues and tones of color whereas others might see only bold primaries, or even only black and white.

Passionate people can form deep attachments and react to the feeling tone of situations; they may think with their feelings. Dorothea Lange, well known documentary photographer during the Depression and in the 1940s, used her feelings about her subjects to express herself in her art. For her, the feelings her photographic subjects evoked were the important thing, not the photograph perse (Meltzer, 1985).

Another aspect of sensitivity has to do with the compassion many gifted people feel for others. Although not all exhibit compassion, those who do find that they make commitments to other people, and to social causes, that involve caring for others and the desire to decrease the pain they feel in others. This commitment to decrease suffering may be direct, as in the example of Mother Teresa of India, or at more of a distance, through witnessing and recording atrocities, as Dorothea Lange did with her photographs of migrant workers in California during the Depression (Meltzer, 1985).

Poets, some investigative reporters, Peace Corps workers, people who volunteer to work to combat poverty overseas, those who fight to save wildlife, many peace activists, and some political and religious leaders may be gifted and high in sensitivity. Examples might include Elizabeth Blackwell, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Albert Schweitzer.

## Issues Related to Sensitivity

Growing up as an unusually sensitive person may bring enduring consequences in adulthood. How these gifted people are perceived will depend on how they show their sensitivity, how well they have learned to establish interpersonal boundaries, how they have been able to forge connections with others, and how they have channeled their dedication, sense of commitment, and passion.

People with the trait of sensitivity can find positive benefits in their passion and compassion. Dedication to a cause can do much good around the world, as well as bring personal satisfaction to the doer. The sensitive gifted adult is privy to moments of ecstasy—times when he or she seems in tune with the universe. This sense of unity is an experience of universal sharing of self, which can bring great joy.

Empathic gifted people find positive social/emotional benefits in their deep concern for the needs and rights of others, their worry about others' feelings, and
Warts and Rainbows

their desire to help others, even at significant cost to themselves. They tend to be
highly moral people, concerned with giving and with doing what is right for others.
Their empathy allows them to be good friends, and they are often willing to give
freely of their time, money, and energy. They feel for those less fortunate, and
because they have a highly developed sense of justice, they try to make things
better for others who cannot do it for themselves.

These are people who can listen to another's point of view, take another's
feelings into account, and try to look at both sides of an issue — even an issue that
is painful to them. The motivation for caring comes from acutely feeling the needs
of others and from wanting to share in the uniqueness of others by trying to
understand them. Compassionate, empathic gifted adults can be "gifted
givers"—they may give for the joy of it, to share part of themselves with others,
or as an altruistic act. This sort of giving does not demand a return and is usually
done without others even noticing.

On the more negative side, these gifted adults may not understand that
others do not feel as deeply or as intensely as they do, or that others might have
different, equally legitimate priorities. Gifted adults may perceive those priorities
as superficial and be highly intolerant of whatever interferes with their endeavors.

Because sensitive gifted adults care so much, others can disappoint them.
They may find that others regard them as immature, living in a fantasy world
composed of youthful dreams and ideals long past the time when they should
have given up extreme idealism and gotten on with the business of living.

Those who are gifted and sensitive may be so empathic that others hesitate
to share their feelings; they may feel that they have burdened the gifted adult with
their pain. Also, because the gifted person seems to feel so much more acutely
than they do, they may feel robbed of the importance of their own feelings.
Empathic gifted adults who are given givers sometimes have trouble setting limits
on what they share with and give to others. Because they want to help, they may
give far too much and foster a sense of helplessness in others. They also may find
themselves used by a continuing stream of others who are unable to give in return.
Some sensitive gifted adults become compulsive givers because they feel so much
pain around them, with the cost that they, and others, forget that they, too, have
needs. Women in particular seem to be at risk for this. One study termed the
problem "the selfless syndrome" (Lernkau & Landau, 1986).

Therapy Considerations

Many of the problems that sensitive gifted adults bring to therapy relate to
their still having difficulty in establishing appropriate interpersonal boundaries,
dealing with giving and receiving, and developing an integrated identity. In
addition, some have been misdiagnosed as suffering from personality disorders.
Although some gifted adults do, indeed, suffer from personality disorders in
addition to being gifted, people who are unusually sensitive, are compassionate
and caring, display empathy, and are passionate about their beliefs may also have
problems with establishing appropriate boundaries and may feel unhappy about
others' treatment of them. These people need a supportive context to help them
understand the problem, to learn how to use their unusual abilities to feel the
feelings of others more appropriately, and to explore issues related to identity
formation.

Feeling responsible for others and for what happens in the world are
important issues for sensitive gifted adults. Many express a great feeling of
responsibility towards others. In some ways, being gifted with extreme sensitivity
is similar to being academically gifted. In both cases, individuals expect higher
levels of performance, motivation, and dedication of themselves. Therapists
should help these people determine the level of responsibility for others that feels
satisfying without feeling burdensome and that allows them to feel positive about
themselves. Developing useful strategies for judging situations in which their
sensitivity can play a role in determining outcome is vital.

Another area in which these gifted adults have difficulty concerns the
empathic connections they feel to many others, including the therapist. The idea
of formation of self is important in this regard. These gifted adults may have
trouble forming a sense of self as entirely separate and apart from other people.
The self psychologies (Kline, 1976; Kohut, 1959) of the past decades have
emphasized a detached self — a self that is maintained separate from the influence
of others and that is self-sufficient. Extremely empathic people can never achieve
this sort of self, and to assume that this is the only healthy sort of self to achieve
is not in their best interests. To develop this self-in-isolation requires that these
people deny or renounce part of who they are!

For the highly empathic gifted adult, a sense of self-in-relationship may work
better — a more fluid sense of self that develops in response to the felt connections
to others. Post (1988) has discussed this issue in more detail in her study of
high-achieving women. New theories of self-in-relationship (Jordan, 1984; Surrey,
1984) suggest that development of the self can depend on the individual's relation
to the environment. Within this context, the sense of connectedness that highly
gifted people feel becomes a central part of their identity formation.

Gifted adults who are passionate about their endeavors may need therapeutic help in learning how and when to fight for what they believe. They
may need to learn to insulate themselves from the responses of others who regard
them as immature or irresponsible. They need to find self-respect in what they
do, and also some support and validation from like-minded others. They need to
learn to assess the consequences of their passion, both in terms of expected
outcome and in terms of other people's responses. Sometimes they will have to
stand alone, and once they have thoughtfully judged a course of action, they need
to become secure within themselves that they are doing the right thing. A
therapist attempting to work with these people needs to recognize their passion,
support the caring that drives their actions, and help them understand their
choices.

The dilemma for highly sensitive gifted people is to learn to guard their
vulnerability while remaining sensitive to the needs and feelings of others, to

Volume 2, January 1990
Warts and Rainbows

continue caring in the face of disparagement, and to discover how to use their empathy and compassion in ways that foster development of an integrated self.

Perceptiveness

An ability to view several aspects of a situation simultaneously, to understand several layers of self within another, and to get quickly to the core of an issue are characteristic of gifted adults who have the trait of perceptiveness. This insight helps them to understand the meaning of personal symbols, and to see beyond the superficiality of a situation to the person beneath. Margaret Mead, for example, was able to use her unique insight and intuition to understand symbols embedded in culture. Her ideas revolutionized both anthropology and the way society has come to view sexual development. This same capacity for insight earlier in her life suggested to her that she neither hide her intelligence nor be forced to compete intellectually with others at too early an age (Mead, 1972).

Insight, intuition, and the ability to read several layers of feeling simultaneously allow perceptive gifted people to rapidly assess interpersonal situations. In fact, they often are skilled at sensing the incongruency between exhibited social facade and a person’s real thoughts and feelings. To the perceptive gifted person, these social facades may seem to be a sort of lie.

Another aspect of perceptiveness concerns the recognition of and need for truth. These gifted people are detectors and abhorrers of falsehood and hypocrisy. Justice and fairness are also issues. Although they recognize that life is often unfair, they try, within their own lives, to be fair and just to others.

Two aspects of perceptiveness are apparent in many gifted people. First, the person feels that something must be wrong with his or her perceptions because most other people do not seem to see what they see. They presume that other people’s perceptions are more correct because they hold a majority opinion. Because this gifted adult does not understand that others are not as perceptive, he or she is likely to think there is some internal hidden defect that others can see. This person asks: Why am I so different from others? What is wrong with me? Over time this perceptive gifted adult may have come to distrust the self, to take too much to heart the negative criticisms of others, and to allow others too much influence over him or her.

The second aspect translates to the question: Why don’t others see what I see so clearly? Why are they so stupid? Because it is perfectly obvious to these gifted persons what is right, they do not understand how others could not see it, too. Even more puzzling is the realization that others may see the truth and still act from other motives. The foolishness of people in authority over them has often been a problem since childhood.

Some religious and political leaders, scientists, philosophers, therapists, artists, and poets may be especially gifted with perceptiveness. Examples are: Langston Hughes, Anne Hutchinson, and Shakespeare.

Issues Related to Perceptiveness

Perceptiveness has both positive and negative social and emotional correlates. In effect, the gifted adult must come to understand that the question is not whose world view is more accurate but how to use disparate views in ways that enhance connectedness to others and further understanding of the self. Neither the self nor the other is defective or stupid. The adult also has to learn that both accuracy and feelings are important, and which is the priority depends on the issue and the circumstances. This is particularly an issue for those who tend to have difficulty suffering gladly the foolishness of others.

Positive social and emotional aspects of perceptiveness include the ability to understand the motivations of others, to see patterns in the behavior of others that are not readily apparent, and to have unusual depth of insight into the issues involved in relationships. These gifted adults see to the heart of a matter and, in so doing, can be objective about their assessments of self and others. They may base their responses on the underlying dynamics intuited, seek the deeper part of others through use of symbols and metaphor, and help others to understand themselves.

For example, Mary McLeod Bethune, the famous Black educator, was able to help the poet Langston Hughes realize that he had a gift for inspiring others through his poetry and that he could do something important by being a poet. Her insight into Langston Hughes, and into what the Black community needed at the time, forever changed Hughes’ life (Meltzer, 1987).

Perceptive gifted adults know what is right for themselves and operate from a “feel” for what to say and do. Their following of intuition can result in being able to trust the self as a primary support and resource. If gifted adults can understand what perceptiveness is and how it affects their relationships with others, they can find greater inner harmony. Being true to oneself is especially important for those who value truth and fairness; otherwise they may end up feeling they are living a lie.

On the negative side, perceptiveness can present difficulties in interpersonal relationships. Others may experience vague feelings of discomfort in the presence of a gifted adult who can see through them. The gifted adult, no matter how tactful, might tell others truths they may not wish to hear. Even those who do wish to know the truth may feel discomfort in hearing the truth about themselves. It can also be confusing for the gifted adult who sees several layers of another’s personality, or layers of meaning within a situation. It is difficult to know the level at which to respond. The greater the discrepancy between the inner and outer selves, the greater discomfort the gifted adult feels.

The perceptive adult who wondered in childhood why others did not see the truth, or thought others to be stupid, may have become disillusioned at an early age with the adult world; he or she may find that, in becoming an adult, things have not changed. Others are still unappreciative of having errors pointed out, and the foolishness of authorities can still be difficult to suffer. Some people
Warts and Rainbows

may distrust the gifted individual who values honesty because they are not honest themselves; others cannot stand to have their versions of reality shattered. Rather than changing, they do something to discredit or remove the gifted adult. Gifted adults often misunderstand this cognitive dissonance because they cannot conceive why someone would not want to know a better way to do things.

Some gifted individuals who are high in the trait of perceptiveness may forget that the patterns they see and the world in which they create the new order of things are not theirs to use. In fact, others may use the new knowledge created for negative ends. Also, the eventual consequences may not evolve in the context envisioned but, rather, in the context of how the rest of the world perceives things.

A poignant example of this might have occurred with the Manhattan Project, when the goals of Oppenheimer, Szilard, and Fermi probably did not include the vision of a world stockpiling nuclear weapons or posed on the brink of a nuclear winter. Einstein, on the other hand, appears to have had some perception of possible future consequences (Clark, 1971).

A focus on solving an interesting challenge, and not on the long-term consequences in the hands of others, can be a primary issue for all perceptive gifted adults. This “Einstein Factor” belongs not only to scientists but also to social reformers, philosophers, political leaders, and others whose thoughts and actions have the potential to change the world.

Therapy Considerations

Therapy issues for perceptive gifted adults often concern interpersonal relationships. Those who are sensitive as well as perceptive may learn a great deal about their own perceptions and those of others, but they also may come to discover the depths of their own loneliness. It is particularly lonely to be the one who can appreciate the depths of others, yet find few who can appreciate one’s own depths. Within the loneliness is often a yearning for someone who can experience the self in the way that the person experiences others. Consequently, all the usual methods of expanding social relationships and learning to share the interests of others may fail. Often these people wonder if they are unlovable.

Because it may really feel to others that the perceptive gifted person can read minds, interpersonal relationships with these people can feel uncomfortable to others, including the therapist. If the gifted person can learn to recognize the problem, recognize the cues signaling that others are reaching a level of discomfort, and relax and regain a little interpersonal distance for a time, it can be helpful. This can mean waiting to find people who are less threatened by insight and learning to be more sensitive to others’ limits of insight into themselves. Therapy can be helped by freely allowing the exploration of insights and intuition, as well as in learning the tolerance points of the therapist who can be honest about vulnerability to the gifted person’s insightful revelations.

Other perceptive adults may still need to explore the existential problem of how to live a fair and just life. Sometimes, understanding how other people view fairness and justice can help to build a sense that virtues as absolutes are somewhat limiting. Understanding the cultural basis of certain views of fairness and justice can be helpful in building a sense of what is universally accepted. This can help the gifted person in turn understand the value of differing standards of truth and justice and to weigh which seems right for him or her, and why.

The dilemma for the perceptive gifted adult is how and when to use the gift with self and others. If it is used without assessing the consequences, others will feel threatened and uncomfortable; if it is ignored, the person risks losing valuable information about people and relationships. The gifted adult must learn to live with the gift, to value its use in understanding, and to learn to use it judiciously, bearing in mind both the feelings and possible limitations of others. Finding interpersonal support is a major priority for these gifted adults.

Entelechy

Derived from the Greek word for having a goal, entelechy is a particular type of motivation, need for self-determination, and an inner strength and vital force directing life and growth to become all one is capable of being. Gifted people with entelechy are often attractive to others who feel drawn to their openness and to their dreams and visions. Being near someone with this trait gives others hope and determination to achieve their own self-actualization. From childhood days others often have seen these people as “special,” and the adults who were drawn to them often helped them overcome obstacles and served as mentors and friends.

These gifted people are deeply involved in making their own destiny. This “will to be” enables them to continue despite tremendous hindrances. They believe in themselves even when no one else does. Great teachers, therapists, social reformers, statesmen, and some types of artists are numbered among those so gifted. Examples include Abraham Lincoln, Georgia O’Keefe, Carl Rogers, and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Issues Related to Entelechy

Growing up as a child with entelechy may have enduring consequences in adulthood. If the person was able to learn to use his or her strong will and inner spirit to pursue a dream, to understand the responses of others, and to develop meaningful sources of support, the gifted adult will be a person who is able to overcome obstacles and continue to pursue his or her own destiny. For example, Camille Pissaro, the French Impressionist painter, continued to paint his own view of nature despite public disapproval, little money, and even the disavowal of other Impressionist friends. He continued painting with little success until he was in his late 60s, even after Impressionism had come into vogue. His inner vision carried him past his discouragement and the desperation he and his family felt to make him one of the world’s greatest painters (Stone, 1985).

On the positive side, the specialness of people gifted in entelechy may attract others who want to learn from them. Some, in fact, just want to be near
the gifted person. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa of India, and Eleanor Roosevelt are all such people. Often adults with entelechy bring deep feelings to a relationship. By spontaneously expressing feelings, they may discourage others to do so as well; by overcoming obstacles, they may serve as sources of inspiration and zeal. Many such gifted adults are able to create “golden moments” of friendship (N. Jenckes, personal communication, December 26, 1984), those special times when two people are their best selves and are able to share on a deep level. These gifted adults often seem to have a touch of magic about them, which draws to them a large number of people who seek them as friends and mentors. As teachers, these gifted people may attract younger gifted people. Whether a scientific team, two therapists in co-practice, or a married couple, the partnerships of these gifted people carry elements of the will to be.

On a negative side, the very specialness that attracted others and led to mentor relationships may become a liability. There comes a day when the mentors of one’s youth become one’s colleagues and competitors. Both the gifted adult and the gifted mentor have to prepare for the independence of this day. If they do not, the gifted adult is likely to feel a loss in the intimacy of the relationship, a puzzling sense of rivalry, and pressure to continue in a dependent role in the relationship. The gifted adult may like the dependent role too much and may not achieve maturity of talent because what he or she does is still subject to the mentor’s approval. This decreases the possibilities of creating something really new and different. Those who survived childhood because of the special attention of a mentor may find that this survival tactic no longer works and they have not developed alternative strategies for self-determination.

The self-actualizing adult may find sources of rare intimacy but also may find a large number of people who are drawn to him or her who have little to offer in return. The gifted adult may come to feel vulnerable to, and intruded upon, by the demands of others who find that the magic wears off and the promise implied in the shared dream does not continue. This may have happened to Martin Luther King, Jr. He was seen as a miracle worker, and people expected him to work miracles all the time. They had trouble allowing him to be a person with needs of his own. When he appeared to have any human frailties, many people were extremely disappointed (Milton, 1987).

The specialness of gifted adults who draw others to them may appear to be a “given” in the relationship. People may think they do not have to do any of the work of the relationship because the specialness of the gifted person will make the relationship continue. When this does not occur, the other person feels cheated.

**Therapy Considerations**

Adults who are high in entelechy come to therapy seeking a deeper participation in life. Some are searching for a mystical or spiritual piece of themselves, some for sources of greater intimacy with other people. These are adults who know they are in the process of self-actualization and need the therapist to be a companion on the long journey of self-discovery. Sometimes this leads to the development of a bond between the therapist and the gifted adult that seems rare in its depth and intimacy. It can be very hard to terminate at the end of therapy because the relationship that developed was a mutual one. Therapy has then become, for both the gifted adult and the therapist, a meeting of true peers—something all too rare in the lives of most gifted adults. Sometimes the relationship lasts past the end of therapy, and sometimes not, but it always has to be acknowledged for what it is.

Some gifted adults come to therapy after the failure of a lifelong dream. While the dream was in process, the person may have received support and even admiration from others. With the failure of the dream, when the power of the promise of future benefit and the excitement of participation in something wonderful is gone, the disappointment of others may be so acute that they cannot tolerate trying to salvage any part of the dream. This may lead to an inner loss of hope and subsequent depression for the gifted adult. The loss of belief in the gifted person as molder of the dream means a loss of personal power.

The therapist will have to help the gifted adult realize what has happened and to find ways to salvage what was valuable about the dream. Some may need help in understanding that creativity and career may be different goals, and that because one part of life has fallen apart need not mean that all has lost meaning. The determination, creativity, and commitment that first led to the dream are still there and can be used to forge a new decision about one’s life. Also, the gifted adult can be helped to see that loss of a particular dream may be instrumental in putting him or her on the path to finding another part of self that otherwise might not be seen.

The dilemma for gifted adults who are high in entelechy is to find ways of preserving their inner spirit and continuing to use it as a wellspring of personal growth toward an inner vision, while recognizing both the attraction and the threat this may hold for others.

**Conclusion**

Psychotherapy with gifted adults is not easy, but it is rewarding. Gifted people often come to a new understanding of themselves and continue to develop after they leave therapy. In working with these people, the therapist also grows and develops; the very difficulty in working with them teaches the therapist new strategies and ways of experiencing people. Therapists learn more about the depths of sensitivity and passion in gifted people and in the self. Often challenged on underlying premises, true understanding, and accurate expression of empathy, the therapist comes to an understanding of these processes on a deeper level.

The therapist learns to understand people who might feel and think very differently from the therapist, and this may bring a surge of recognition as the therapist finds his or her own difference mirrored through the client’s eyes.
Warts and Rainbows

therapist learns about limits — limits in the self, limits of what can be learned from theory, and limits in what one should expect from others who are different from oneself. The therapist also learns about how to transcend limits of pain and isolation to develop a connection with people who may never have experienced a true friend before.

Also, the therapist learns about love. In working with people who are discomfiting to many others and who have been lonely and isolated in their abilities to perceive at a higher level of consciousness, the therapist finds the bonds of the universe open to his or her heart. Finally, the therapist may find in his or her own giftedness a strong touch of divergent thinking, excitability, sensitivity, perceptiveness, and entelechy.

Requests for reprints may be sent to the author at 11 Whiting St., Providence, RI 02906.

REFERENCES


