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Chapter 46

The Unwanted Gifted and Talented: A Sociobiological Perspective of the Societal Functions of Giftedness

Roland S. Persson

Abstract How come certain highly gifted individuals are not allowed to flourish and develop although they exist in an environment that has both the means and the possibility to assist and stimulate such development? Furthermore, how come there is such an over-emphasis on a certain group of abilities in giftedness research, whereas the study of others is more or less ignored? Finally, are there gifted individuals in our midst that we actually do not want? These are questions raised and discussed in this chapter. To answer them, I propose a taxonomy of gifted societal functions based on a socio-biological framework. The phenomena of stigmatizing and marginalizing gifted individuals are discussed in this light. The chapter concludes by suggesting a number of testable hypotheses regarding the predictable outcome of gifted individuals and their function in certain social contexts.

Keywords Gifted function · Gifted and society · Marginalization · Stigmatization · Taxonomy · Sociobiology

Introduction: Four Marginalized Gifted Individuals

First in this chapter, allow me to introduce four exceedingly gifted individuals from three countries, whom I have met by chance over several years and learnt to know fairly well. They are so far, beyond

doubt, the cleverest, most insightful, most friendly, most concerned, the wisest and most knowledgeable people I have yet encountered. Such intellectual, social and practical prowess, one might expect, would be greatly appreciated everywhere; a formidable asset to any employer or organization and they would seem to be dream students at any educational institution. But the fact is they share a common fate: they are appreciated nowhere—and so far not at anytime, except by single individuals in their social network.

James, the Canadian Potential Nobel Laureate

James is a former Canadian “wunderkind”, now in his early 40s. As a child he was already able to beat master’s level chess players. Also a mathematics prodigy, an extraordinary mind when it comes to science and research, a talented footballer, martial artist and a visual artist. He always had a hunger for learning, but hated school and from what he has told me, he was quite cruelly treated in the Catholic school he attended as a child. The situation did not improve as he eventually arrived in higher education! He entered university and quickly stood out because of his exceeding brilliance. However, in surpassing even the knowledge of some of his professors, and being of different opinion than they were on certain scholarly issues, his decline in the academic world swiftly began. The fact that he was outstanding in achievement and scientific thinking did not count for much. He seems to have posed too much of a threat to a few very influential academics of that particular university. In the end, he was denied the much-desired Ph.D. program “for political reason”.

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01 He was even told that he was denied for political rea-
 02 sons. He lost his place in favor of another, and much
 03 less qualified and not nearly as gifted, candidate. This
 04 rejection should be compared to what one professor
 05 who indeed supported James in his efforts had written
 06 in recommending him for the program: "...the most
 07 likely student we have ever had to win a Nobel Prize"!

08 Today, a father of two, he is unemployed. The so-
 09 cietal institutions and workplaces, which could bene-
 10 fit enormously from his skills, generally discard him
 11 when applying to work for them. He is overquali-
 12 fied! Instead he devotes all of his time to convey his
 13 hunger for knowledge to the two sons; and teaches
 14 them in ways that would impress any highly qualified
 15 and skilled teacher.

16 17 18 **Andrew, the Athlete and Formidable** 19 **Problem-Solver**

20
21
22 Andrew from England, in his late 30s, is a computer en-
 23 gineer, an exceedingly talented martial artist as well as
 24 a visual artist working mainly with computer graphics.
 25 He is also a well-respected sports therapist. He went
 26 to a Catholic school, as did James, the staff of which
 27 seemed to have little tolerance for a gifted child with
 28 particular talents and more particularly with Andrew's
 29 independence and having a will of his own. He did not
 30 attend school a great deal of time as a child and was
 31 more often to be found in the local Dojo improving
 32 his skills in martial arts. He grew more skilled than
 33 even his instructors and refused to go for a black belt
 34 in karate for which he was overly qualified. He saw no
 35 meaning in doing so since he was still much better than
 36 his black-belt instructors. He now works for a large
 37 European computer company and solves problems at a
 38 pace and efficiency matched by few others in the same
 39 workplace. However, he is often at odds with superiors
 40 because they find it hard to accept that he, and not they,
 41 has the exact solution to emerging problems. The em-
 42 ployer rather tries to "streamline" him into fitting the
 43 generally organizational company culture; even with
 44 the help of organizational psychologists. This is a fu-
 45 tile task, which Andrew finds ridiculous and demean-
 46 ing. The company strategy tells more of its ignorance
 47 in handling gifted employees rather than Andrew's ar-
 48 gued shortcomings as a "typical" representative of the
 49 company. In his own words:

A couple of months ago at work we were sent to a team
 developer because our department is "dysfunctional". The
 questioning was painful and some of it was so basic it
 felt like an insult to my intelligence. But I decided to go
 along with it and was so blunt there was no room for mis-
 interpretation. The result that came back from this was
 because I let things slide at work simply because my col-
 leagues aren't able to do stuff I can, they said. I see my-
 self as a victim in the team and act that way. In a way,
 I agree but in other [things they said] I disagree. This is
 simply because when you cannot change things with id-
 iots around you why beat your head against a wall to do
 it. There seems no logic in it. This I didn't even bother to
 explain to the psychologist. Why get into a discussion of
 sociology, psychology and group function with an [indi-
 vidual] who is so fast to box people?

Peter, the Polymath with Street Smarts **Beyond Comparison**

Peter is a Swedish young man in his mid-20s. He hated
 school enough to refuse to continue any further formal
 education following secondary school. He was so badly
 treated at school that he will not even touch a book
 unless he absolutely must. In spite of having reached
 his mid-20s he has no permanent job but survives on
 odd jobs and considerable "street smarts". In fact, at
 the time of writing this he has also resigned from a
 part-time job, but still makes a decent living by sim-
 ply knowing how systems work and people in them.
 In the eyes of "talent hunters" and meritocrats there is
 not much tangible to go on in Peter's case. None of
 these would consider him gifted because he does not
 really fall into any traditional "giftedness category".
 However, to have a conversation with him, to hear him
 speak his mind, how he reasons on practical as well
 as social issues, reveals a considerable depth of mind,
 knowledge and self-awareness. He knows how to find
 knowledge and information from other sources than
 written media very effectively. His memory is astound-
 ing. What strikes me the most about Peter is his im-
 mense self-awareness and integrity. He is exceedingly
 systematic, knows exactly what he can do and what he
 cannot do. It is also my impression that since society as
 such has offered him very little, even unfairly worked
 against him at times, he has little respect for formal
 authority. He sometimes therefore stipulates his own
 rules on how to act and exist, which, however, never
 excludes a social pathos. He is always concerned for
 other's well-being. When speaking with him I often

01 find myself corrected by him with an understanding
 02 smile, and he reminds me of things I have argued ear-
 03 lier and obviously forgotten. How can such a brilliant
 04 mind have escaped the attention and interest of the for-
 05 mal education system—not to mention employers?
 06
 07

08 ***Bjorn, the Caring Intellectual Persuader***

09
 10
 11 Bjorn, Swedish, now in his mid-30s, was also plagued
 12 by teachers and school and received no stimulation
 13 at all during his school years (a full case study has
 14 been done on Bjorn, see Persson, 2005). In fact, it
 15 went so far that he decided to “limit his own capac-
 16 ity to think and reason” by sniffing a harmful solvent,
 17 which he argued would damage his brain only “a lit-
 18 tle”. He simply wanted to fit in and “be like every-
 19 one else” and sniffing solvent, he hoped, would achieve
 20 this. Bjorn is academically gifted as well as gifted in
 21 sports. He too is an exceedingly skilled martial artist.
 22 He trains world champions even to the extent of be-
 23 coming a “sensei” creating his own style of martial
 24 arts. He has single-handedly initiated and held together
 25 a world federation for organizing competitions world-
 26 wide in his sport. However, as bright as he is aca-
 27 demically and talented in sports, his most outstand-
 28 ing feature is his social awareness and competence.
 29 He is well aware of the fact that he can probably per-
 30 suade anyone to do almost anything, for the simple rea-
 31 son he immediately invokes confidence, leadership and
 32 competence—and he has plenty of all three! Speaking
 33 with him on this is a like having an imaginary talk with
 34 cartoon figure Clark Kent (“Superman”) on using “su-
 35 per powers” for the good of humanity only. Bjorn is
 36 very alert to the fact that abuse of this ability is pos-
 37 sible, but makes quite clear he has no intentions what-
 38 soever to do so. His ethical principles are very strong
 39 and well considered. Being a qualified teacher he cur-
 40 rently works as a special educator and solves problems
 41 that child psychiatry and formal special educational
 42 methods have not yet managed to come to grips with.
 43 He once rang me and told me triumphantly that the
 44 entire Regional Child and Youth Psychiatry Unit had
 45 come for an unannounced visit to see with their own
 46 eyes what he was actually doing when working so suc-
 47 cessfully with autistic children. Rumors about this had
 48 spread wide and afar. Once the Chief Psychiatrist had
 49 literally applauded him in amazement, the rest of the

visiting delegation chimed in enthusiastically. Bjorn’s
 comment to this was “Ha! and I am not even a PhD!”
 However, the recognition did not lead anywhere; it ac-
 complished nothing more than to satisfy the curios-
 ity of the RCYP Unit. Bjorn has solutions and well-
 functioning practices as a teacher, derived from solid
 theoretical knowledge. He produced better results than
 most, yet he continues to be left to his own devices
 in spite of some recognition. Elsewhere other special
 educators continue to struggle with the problems that
 Bjorn in part has solved.

Bjorn wants to pursue a Ph.D. and discussed this
 with high officials at a neighboring large and quite
 well-known university. The officials were stunned at
 his prowess and considerable knowledge. But when ap-
 plying, he is still never found to be “what they want”.
 He simply does not “fit in”. He is too clever by half and
 seems much too independent in thinking and doing to
 arouse the curiosity of academics in his own field to
 take him on.

These four individuals share certain astounding fea-
 tures. They are all, but perhaps in slightly different
 ways, as follows:

- 1) They are exceedingly and socially aware (or so-
cially intelligent).
- 2) They are astoundingly self-aware.
- 3) Their skills are rarely recognized and appreciated,
not even where they reasonably should be recog-
nized. They are social “misfits” in spite of having a
considerable social pathos. They are either outsiders
by choice or *made* outsiders by others.
- 4) All four are polymaths—gifted in several ways
multitalented (see Root-Bernstein, this volume).
Finally, and this is possibly the most crucial aspect
shared by them.
- 5) They seem to pose a *threat* to certain individuals,
not necessarily all, as they try to rise upwards in
social hierarchies (be it either in an institution of
formal education, a manual labor workplace, in an
organization or company or in a school). They have
become accustomed to being treated as more or less
unwanted; an inconvenience. Few, if any, in the so-
cietal establishment, could care less whether these
individuals are correct in what they do or say. Thus,
they are not only to some extent stigmatized be-
cause of what they know and how they employ in
practice what they know, they have also become, in
sociological terms, marginalized.

Involuntary Stigmatization and Voluntary Marginalization

The social dimension of giftedness is nearly always missing when scholars and practitioners debate, discuss and publish on matters of giftedness and talent (Persson, 1999), and particularly questions on what *function* gifted individuals have or will have in society. This then is the objective of this chapter: to explore functions and the possible causes of stigmatization and marginalization of gifted individuals that appear to accompany certain types of giftedness.

The following questions will be explored: How come certain very gifted individuals are rarely allowed to flourish and develop although they exist in an environment that has both the means and the possibility to assist and stimulate such development? Note that I am *not* referring to able underachievers (Montgomery, 2000) or the so-called gifted disadvantaged (Wallace & Adams, 1993). Furthermore, how come there is such an over-emphasis on a certain group of abilities in giftedness research, whereas others are more or less ignored? Finally, is it perhaps the case that society as a whole does not *want* certain kinds of gifted individuals in its midst?

History Provides Interesting Examples

“Not very many ‘pure creatives’ go into conventional education,” Shaughnessy & Manz (1991) observe, “typically, artists, musicians, and writers find their life’s work outside bureaucratic institutions which may hamper their creativity and originality” (p. 98). It is not only the possibility of being hampered within a formal setting, however, that is sometimes a problem to these individuals. They are likely to encounter difficulties outside of formal education and formal organizations too. Any textbook on the history of the arts or music will provide ample illustrations of how both visual artists and Western classical composers introducing new ideas were ridiculed and shunned in their own time and by their own immediate social context; so often so it has almost become a legendary principle: shunned and harassed whilst alive but praised and exalted when passed away and gone. To this end, Machlis (1979) summarizes contemporary music

history in the following noteworthy way: “Audiences were persuaded that the art as they had known it was coming to an end, and responded accordingly. Perfectly respectable individuals in Paris, Vienna, and elsewhere hissed and hooted, banged chairs, and engaged in fistfights with strangers. Today, the works that caused these antics are enthroned as classics of the modern repertory. The men who wrote them are acknowledged masters” (p. 4).

Similarly, most of the winners of the prestigious American MacArthur Award, from a variety of fields of endeavor, also met considerable resistance by their surrounding social context when deviating too much in thinking or doing. Shekerjian (1990), having interviewed 40 of these laureates, concludes that “an unfortunate aspect of creative work is that it requires an element of risk-taking. The risk, say, of exposing your own private persona. Of revealing something not quite ready for public scrutiny. Of having to go beyond the sure footing of experience and expertise. Of having to part paths with friends and mentors. Of jeopardizing resources and making mistakes. Of suffering unintended consequences and even ruin. Society shuns its heretics” (p. 16–17). Shekerjian also makes the observation that “the MacArthur Fellows are not quitters. Even in the face of insult. Or when confronted with defeat. Or when up against humiliation, despondency, hostility, boredom, or indifference. They find a way to make adjustments, to keep at it, to stay buoyant, to believe in themselves” (p. 198).

As also Shekerjian (1990) concludes, the scientific world is by no means an exception from marginalizing and even stigmatizing members of the science community; members who distance themselves away from mainstream research and knowledge even criticize it because they suspect or have perhaps already found that alternative explanations are better than the established ones. The difficulty in attracting attention and acceptance for new, and often probably better, ideas and testable theories is infamously difficult (Segerstråle, 2000). A breakthrough, if it occurs at all, has even been outlined as a “revolution” in nature (Kuhn, 1962). Furthermore, the resistance of scientists to change their minds from the old to the new, even in the face of convincing evidence contrary to their convictions, has been termed *cognitive conservatism* by Greenwald (1980) and is understood by him as a defense mechanism proper, though some are prone to resist change more than others (Johnson et al. 1988).

01 Thus, following new insights, new knowledge, new
 02 understandings or views and opinions prompted by
 03 these, stigmatization and marginalization often follow.
 04 Crocker and Quinee (2003) define stigmatization as
 05 “[having] a social identity, or membership in some so-
 06 cial category, that raises doubts about one’s full human-
 07 ity. One is devalued, spoiled, or flawed in the eyes of
 08 others . . . Stigmatized individuals are often the targets
 09 of negative stereotypes and elicit emotional reactions
 10 such as pity, anger, anxiety or disgust but the central
 11 feature of social stigma is devaluation and dehumaniza-
 12 tion by others” (p. 153). Marginalization, on the other
 13 hand, as defined by Hall, Stevens and Meleis (1994),
 14 is the peripheralization of individuals and groups from
 15 a dominant, central majority. Marginalization is under-
 16 stood as a sociopolitical process, producing both vul-
 17 nerabilities (risks) and strengths (resilience).

18 Why then, are some individuals stigmatized? It is
 19 very likely that this tendency has biological origins
 20 and is deeply rooted in the human species’ need to
 21 live and exist in effective groups (Neuberg, Smith, &
 22 Asher, 2003). It follows that a certain social equilib-
 23 rium therefore is strived for. There is resistance to
 24 change, but not necessarily to all changes. It is safe to
 25 say that no one in a group, smaller or larger, will resist
 26 change if they can clearly understand there is tangible
 27 gain of some sort, not too distant in time, deemed de-
 28 sirable. However, the opposite is likely to be true also:
 29 where gain cannot be perceived, or if indeed loss of
 30 some kind is involved (loss of influence, power, wel-
 31 fare, perks, privileges, income, prestige, status and so
 32 on), few would be willing to accept a change lightly.
 33 Whoever purports a change involving loss, also runs
 34 the risk of being stigmatized because of it. More on
 35 this later.

36 Why do gifted individuals, also being gifted among
 37 other gifted, sometimes choose marginalization?
 38 Storr (1972) favors discussing personality and argues
 39 that high creatives are schizoid and therefore shuns
 40 social contexts. They prefer to be alone for lack of
 41 social understanding and interest. However, I think an
 42 equally valid explanation would be, as Shaughnessy
 43 & Manz (1991) point out, that very creative people
 44 sometimes *choose* relative seclusion having realized by
 45 experience that stepping aside, leaving certain environ-
 46 ments or at the very least avoiding much contact with
 47 others if remaining in a formal setting is best to retain
 48 their creativity, their free and independent mind. The
 49 four cases outlined at the beginning of this chapter all

showed considerable social skills and a social pathos
 at that, and yet they were marginalized. The social
 context surrounding such a person would perhaps
 understand seclusion as regressive behavior. However,
 from the point of view of the person choosing relative
 isolation, it is more likely to be a chosen coping
 mechanism. If we count on a percentage of the total
 population being in various ways gifted, there must on
 occasion arise situations where one single individual
 is right and everyone else is probably wrong. That
 single individual will most likely find life problematic,
 since the operational principle, at least in democracies,
 usually is that “the majority is always right”. How
 to deal with the fact that people are different and
 that people are individual is a recurring problem to
 democracy theorists (e.g., Benhabib, 1996). The single
 deviant, however, will often try to find ways of coping
 without losing sense of self-esteem, enthusiasm, the
 will to continue and so on. The literature on this
 “darker side” of giftedness is limited. Landau (1990)
 provides a few cases. One of these reports a young
 highly gifted girl to whom recognition appeared never
 to have been given, neither at home nor at school.
 As a result, the girl closed herself to further social
 contact and never again regained full motivation to
 hone her skills or confidence in establishing a social
 network. Kelly-Streznewski (1999) speaks of “the
 mixed blessings of extraordinary potential” in her
 study of 100 grownups aged 28–90. Fiedler (1999),
 who has reviewed this particular field of study, con-
 cludes that “along with the promise of potential 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).

In summary, society and social contexts react to
 gifted individuals in various ways. However, social
 environments also react to potentials: what a gifted
 individual might achieve if allowed to continue.
 Sometimes the gifted choose marginalization to be
 able to cope, and at times they become stigmatized
 when trying to bring about a change involving a
 loss for a group of people or to individuals in this
 group. Some suggestions of change, however, are
 rather praised and rewarded. That which dictates
 being commended, praised and rewarded or reproved,
 harassed and in different ways even punished seems
 to follow specific patterns, namely patterns of social
 function.

Giftedness and Sociobiology

There are, I believe, often but of course not necessarily always, *sociobiological* reasons for social ascendancy, social acceptance or rejection, and that this at least to a degree may explain why some gifted individuals are noticed, favored and given due attention while others are ignored and even harassed in spite of their obvious talent and suitability for certain jobs, tasks, positions, skills, subjects of study and so on. While biological determinants for a variety of human behaviors may well be complex and not yet fully understood, it would be foolishness to underplay their reality (Wilson, 2000). Testosterone, for example, decides the cognitive architecture of the brain (Duchaine, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2001) and has even been suggested to be responsible for the development and structures of the entire human social reality (Kemper, 1990). Our general ignorance of how biology actually affect our daily lives has prompted Freund (1988) to even suggest that we need to bring “society into the body”, and align our understanding of societal processes with how the body works and functions. Failing to do so, he argues, would lead to “blind social constructivism” that exaggerates the processes of society and mentality without seeing some of the real processes governing the interplay between the society and the body. It is essential, therefore, also in studying various aspects of 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).

To put what we generally term giftedness into a sociobiological perspective, where evolutionary mechanisms play a considerable role, there is a need to understand the social *functions* of the phenomenon. Hence, a taxonomy of gifted behaviors as functions is needed.

Proposing a Taxonomy of Gifted Social Functions

Whomever we recognize as “gifted” is usually identified on the basis of the fact that there is a social value—positive or negative—attributed to that label. A mathematician is no doubt gifted in his or her domain but

the same may well be true of someone who society has decided to label a felon (Walsh, 2003). To say that someone is a “criminal” is to a large extent a social construction. That which is illegal in one country is not necessarily illegal in another. Concern has been raised by some researchers that the young gifted, particularly when feeling alienated (such as by stigmatization) from their social context, take to “antisocial behavior”. This too is perhaps a dubious term considering that it is even more of a social construction (see Fiedler, 1999). In other words, we seek only to identify and hopefully stimulate those talents which society recognizes as particularly valuable in one way or another.

Giftedness as a construct is invariably two issues combined: a cognitive hardware (of which talent and giftedness research has uncovered a great deal) and a social response to it (of which we are relatively ignorant). It follows that if there is social significance awarded to giftedness, then giftedness also has a sociobiological function. This, in turn, means that at least at some level an inter-species comparison can be made. Wilson (2004) suggests that “human behavior can be evaluated . . . first by comparison with the behavior of other species and then, with far greater difficulty and ambiguity, by studies of variation among and within human populations. The picture of genetic determinism emerges most sharply when we compare selected major categories of animals with the human species” (p. 20). A few examples of a believed beneficial social function for the gifted and talented in society are in order.

The following statement by former Indonesian State Minister for Population: Haryono Suyono (1996), as part of his address to the Fourth Asia-Pacific Conference on giftedness is a good example of anticipated “gifted function”. He points out that

within a few short years the 21st century will become a transparent era with numerous opportunities and limitations. In that era superior quality human resources will be required. They will have to fulfill stringent qualifications to be able to face the finite natural and capital resources . . . These resources do indeed belong to the next generations and we are obliged to preserve and even to increase these in quantity and quality . . . We all have to help these gifted children and to give them the required support and, in so doing, not alienate them from their respective families and the communities, as our national heritage is the family bond. We must enhance the family to have the ability to bring their gifted children to the surface and to nurture them for the progress and future of the nation (p. 71 & p. 77).

01 Suyono's address on future needs and the significance
 02 of skilful and highly able human resources came true in
 03 a dramatic way not long after the Minister's address as
 04 the whole of Southeast Asia, and particularly Indone-
 05 sia, plunged into the abyss of financial turmoil, and be-
 06 cause of it also some social upheaval. A number of in-
 07 dividuals in Indonesia and elsewhere then had the far
 08 from enviable task to solve problems associated with
 09 "finite natural and capital resources".

10 In 1985, another member of government: Dorothee
 11 Wilms (1986), then Minister of Education and Science
 12 in the former Federal Republic of Germany, addressed
 13 The Sixth World Conference of The World Council for
 14 Gifted and Talented Children in Hamburg in a way sim-
 15 ilar to that of her Indonesian colleague. She opened the
 16 conference by making the observation that

17 The need for excellence in Science and research, in in-
 18 dustry and technology is increasing worldwide. No coun-
 19 try which wishes to secure the future of its citizens can,
 20 or even may, afford to leave undetected and unsupported
 21 a major part of the intellectual and creative abilities of
 22 its people. Every society which wants to prosper and
 23 meet the challenges of the future has to rely on a high
 24 level of achievement in all its citizens . . . When solv-
 25 ing the present difficult economic, social and technologi-
 26 cal problems, but also answering intellectual and cultural
 27 questions, it is indispensable that people with outstand-
 28 ing abilities and the willingness for excellence co-operate
 29 . . . Giving special promotion to the gifted is considered by
 the Federal Government an additional [and] a supplement-
 ary investment in the future . . . (pp. 16–17).

30 Gifted individuals are often seen as "the hope of the
 31 future". Giftedness is therefore not only a phenomenon
 32 of interest to scientists and educators. Its research and
 33 pursuit also create obligations towards society (Vor-
 34 beck, 1992; Tee Tao & Ling Quah, 1999).

37 **Societal Maintenance**

38 A first social function should therefore reasonably be
 39 a *maintenance function*. "Nerd" would undoubtedly be
 40 the vernacular term for this type of individual. It is my
 41 observation that the original notion of nerd as some-
 42 thing more or less undesirable and negative—"an indi-
 43 vidual hopelessly out of fashion, uninterested in sports
 44 and trendy past times, but has an excessive interest in
 45 books, science, arts and/or computers, usually pursued
 46 at a level well beyond the advancement expected for a
 47 certain age" (cf. MIT Nerd Test, 1998)—has changed

much into its opposite. As we become more and more
 dependent on expertise and advanced technology—
 well beyond the average person's comprehension and
 know-how—the nerd is slowly turning into a much-
 wanted man or woman. If recognizing giftedness as
 cause for special provision in education, it is mainly
this gifted function that is wanted and approved by the
 society. Societal institutions and market alike need the
 nerds as future national problem solvers and facilitators
 of continued profit and welfare. Among them are sci-
 entists, engineers, health-care staff, product develop-
 ers, industrial designers and so on. In a sociobiological
 perspective, they maintain societal structures by inven-
 tions, refinements and improvements in 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

Entertainment should not be underestimated. Label-
 ing this function "entertainment" is by no means in-
 tended to lessen or deny gifted individuals with this
 type of social function their value. They fill an im-
 portant and much appreciated function to a great many
 people worldwide in various ways.

We sometimes call these individuals "heroes" in ev-
 eryday language. A hero is traditionally defined as a
 person of exceptional qualities who wins admiration
 by noble deeds. However, a hero may also be some-
 one who has certain desirable attributes not necessarily
 related to anything noble, such as is probably the case
 with most successful and famous athletes, artists and
 musicians. They become involuntary leaders because
 they act as role models, willingly or unwillingly, for
 many who wish to become like them. A hero there-
 fore is someone admired, someone we want to see, as-
 sociate with or be with because they strengthen our
 sense of identity (Klapp, 1962; 1969) or at times al-
 low for individuals with a relatively poor self-image to
 bask in their glory (Cialdini et al. 1976). Alternatively,
 heroes may help individuals to achieve a cathartic ex-
 perience by means of, for example, a sport event or a
 concert (see Russel, 1993, for an overview of catharsis
 in sport). Nobel Prize Laureate Konrad Lorenz (1966)
 argued that "while some early forms of sport, like the

01 jousting of medieval knights, may have had an appre-
 02 ciable influence on sexual selection, the main function
 03 of sport today lies in cathartic discharge of aggressive
 04 urge . . .” (p. 242).

05 If so, no wonder that gifted individuals who offer
 06 the best possible entertainment—which of course is a
 07 form of escape from the daily stress of life, evoking
 08 dreams of an alternative (and perhaps better) reality
 09 and/or offering excitement and thrill—are promoted,
 10 popular and amongst the highest paid individuals in
 11 modern societies: popular musicians, Hollywood ac-
 12 tors, footballers and ice hockey players, popular writ-
 13 ers, visual artists and so on. Their skills are highly re-
 14 garded and usually highly rewarded.

15 Observe, however, that the relationship between en-
 16 tertainment and existing power hierarchies and social
 17 settings tends to be an easy and trouble-free one. From
 18 a sociobiological perspective, they usually present no
 19 challenge to societal structures and existing power hier-
 20 archies. Quite the opposite, they help maintain stability
 21 in a society by simply diverting people’s attention from
 22 other and more critical matters concerned with, for ex-
 23 ample, employment, equal opportunities, social wel-
 24 fare, education, discrimination, individual rights and
 25 so on which, depending on the society in which the
 26 live, may effect their daily lives dramatically in every-
 27 thing but a positive way. Baumeister (1991) sees thrills
 28 and excitements as a means to escape a life “in the fast
 29 lane”. He argues that “events that carry threatening im-
 30 plications about the self make people want to escape.
 31 They want to forget about their identities if worries are
 32 associated with them” (p. 27).

33 Amongst the heroes in this perspective are, apart
 34 from athletes, also many musicians, artists, writers,
 35 filmmakers, actors and so on. But, not all of these re-
 36 main within the function of societal entertainment. En-
 37 tertainment might become satirical or ironic and start
 38 serving another social function, in which case their re-
 39 lationship to societal power hierarchies may change
 40 dramatically. Some heroes become agents of *societal*
 41 *change*.

44 **Societal Change**

45 As discussed earlier, not all kinds of giftedness are
 46 liked! We obviously love and adore some for specific
 47 reasons as shown above, but we also discourage, ignore
 48
 49

and perhaps even suppress others, particularly those
 who have the potential to achieve societal change and
 where these “agents” of such change are persuasive
 idealists who could easily gain people’s confidence.
 Stigmatization and marginalization become frequent
 phenomena in this context. Above all, when by their
 knowledge and insightfulness, these gifted individuals
 publicly expose flaws in social systems, they also po-
 tentially pose a threat to the dominance of a certain in-
 dividual or group of individuals, especially so for indi-
 viduals in power who have personal gains to make if
 systems remain unchanged.

Through history these gifted individuals have often
 been termed *martyrs*. However, the notion of a mar-
 tyr in this context has a wider meaning than merely,
 according to religious traditions, to be someone who
 sacrifices his or her life for a faith or achieves some-
 thing on behalf of that faith. A martyr is of course also
 not necessarily a gifted individual. In recent years, mar-
 tyrts, as reported in the media, have become horrifically
 associated with terrorism and suicide bombings (Hud-
 son, 1999). I think it fair to argue, however, that over
 the centuries individuals remembered for being perse-
 cuted and often murdered in their efforts to either make
 the world a better place or having selflessly achieved
 something for someone else could presumably be re-
 garded as in various ways gifted also by contemporary
 theoretical definitions. It has been suggested, for ex-
 ample, that highly creative individuals usually lack a
 fit to their social context and that they have a tendency
 to cause more or less permanent changes in history as
 applied to their field of interest (cf. Gardner, 1988; Si-
 monton, 1988; Sternberg & Lubart, 1995). This is cer-
 tainly true of some of the agents of social change. I
 can think of several modern examples: Nelson Man-
 dela, Martin Luther King and Aung San Sun Ky, all
 of whom became Nobel Peace Prize Laureates (see
 the Nobel Prize Foundations excellent overview on the
 Internet, with motivations for all the prizes awarded
 and laureates’ biographies: <http://nobelprize.org>). Also
 individuals like Sakharov (1991), Havel (1985), Val-
 ladares (2001) and Wu and Vecsey (1996) and many
 more known, and presumably even more unknown, be-
 long to this group of individuals.

It is important to observe that I am not limiting this
 discussion to totalitarian political systems, more often
 tied to brutal persecution of dissidents. In a sociobi-
 ological perspective, democracies do much the same, but
 usually not as brutally! Democracy in this context is

01 best understood as a system of control, which in a way
 02 is designed to save us from ourselves; that is, it is usu-
 03 ally not possible for anyone in a leading position—or
 04 for anyone aspiring to leadership—to act without being
 05 condoned by a democratic process in which not every-
 06 one will necessarily agree to what is suggested. How-
 07 ever, human nature as prompted by biology and evo-
 08 lution does not differ from one culture to another and
 09 remains the same irrespective of the political system.
 10 Hardly any position of dominance in a social structure
 11 will be abandoned lightly anywhere. And when threat-
 12 ened it will be defended. Only the means by which po-
 13 sitions are defended will differ depending on available
 14 control systems. The allure of gaining power and influ-
 15 ence is presumably and equally strong everywhere, in
 16 all groups, and at all levels of society.

17 I do not understand the notion of martyrdom in this
 18 context of gifted social function as necessarily some-
 19 thing you seal by giving up your life (or more often
 20 throughout history: have it taken). A martyr is mainly
 21 someone who is made to suffer in a group, large or
 22 small, in spite of altruistic intentions for the sole reason
 23 their ability permanently change the social system in
 24 which they exist, partly or fully, is recognized by oth-
 25 ers, who interpret this ability as a threat to their own
 26 dominance in that particular context. A martyr is there-
 27 fore often *stigmatized*.

28 Few would want to have such a gifted individual
 29 in their midst if they present a potential challenge for
 30 dominance in the in-group, but paradoxically the mar-
 31 tyr's effort may well be applauded and praised by other
 32 individuals *not* in that particular in-group. As the say-
 33 ing goes: "No one is a prophet in their own country".
 34 The struggles and heroism of Nelson Mandela (1991),
 35 for example, were commended by the global com-
 36 munity, but simultaneously abhorred by the Apartheid
 37 System and its proponents then alive and well in South
 38 Africa. They did their best to eliminate the impact of
 39 Mandela's presence.

40 Martyrs are no longer individuals who necessarily
 41 lose their lives untimely because of inopportune and al-
 42 truitistic religious deeds and convictions. They are rather
 43 gifted individuals with a profound understanding of
 44 social structures and the cause and effect within so-
 45 cial systems. These are perhaps the ones, who in the
 46 words of British philosopher Russel (2000), are gov-
 47 erned by three strong passions: "the longing for love,
 48 the search for knowledge and understanding and an
 49 unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind". But

gifted individuals prompting social change are still un-
 der persecution—and differently so depending on the
 cultures and political systems in which they exist. They
 are often the unwanted gifted individuals; unwanted
 even under democratic rule.

Answering the Posed Questions

How come certain very gifted individuals are never al-
 lowed to flourish and develop although they exist in an
 environment that has both the means and the possibil-
 ity to assist and stimulate such development—just like
 the four cases previously presented? In a sociobiologi-
 cal framework outlining the likely functions of gifted
 individuals in a social context (see Table 46.1), this
 question is not difficult to answer. Some gifted individ-
 uals may simply pose a threat to others around them; a
 threat to the self-esteem of some who feel somehow in-
 ferior. But in a larger perspective, they may also threat
 positions of power and influence at all levels of soci-
 ety. History provides countless examples of dissidents
 persecuted in a multitude of ways.

To potentially pose a threat is what makes a socio-
 biological framework suitable in understanding the an-
 swer to the question. Threats are handled by animals
 and humans alike in mainly four ways: (1) posturing,
 (2) submission, (3) escape or (4) attack and elimina-
 tion (Barnard, 2004; Grossman, 1995). Our first choice
 is generally not to eliminate the threat posed by an-
 other individual. It is rather to scare him or her off by
 demonstrating superiority in a variety of ways (postur-
 ing). 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 (or
 in line with previous discussion: marginalize ourselves
 to be able to keep an acceptable sense of emotional and
 creative equilibrium). However, we may resort to form-
 ing liaisons instead. It is better to be friend and ally to
 perceived superiority rather than to be its enemy (sub-
 mission). As a last resort, we attack and eliminate with

Table 46.1 The sociobiological functions of giftedness and talent

Social function	Popular label
Maintenance	The nerd
Entertainment	The hero
Change	The martyr

01 the ultimate purpose of once and for all ridding our-
 02 selves of the threat. Needless to say, this has been done
 03 in many ways in all cultures and societies through his-
 04 tory. Some incarcerate “inconvenient individuals” for
 05 no legally tenable reason. Others make them disappear
 06 and/or have them killed. But the more common way,
 07 especially in a democracy, is probably to defame, un-
 08 dermine credibility, ignore and/or ostracize such an in-
 09 dividual.

10 How come there is such an over-emphasis on a cer-
 11 tain group of abilities in giftedness research, whereas
 12 others are more or less ignored? What we research and
 13 study is to a large extent governed by demand. There
 14 may be an abundance of research funding available to
 15 study, for example, the corporate careers of very suc-
 16 cessful women or the nature of innovation and creativ-
 17 ity. But there is hardly any funding available to study
 18 “street smarts” or, say, the skills of bus drivers or the
 19 expertise of a car mechanic. What we study is largely
 20 governed by cultural and political mores and goals. No
 21 less important is that we do what it takes to make a
 22 career as a scientist. If so, being controversial would
 23 not be an advantage! This means we study that which
 24 provides societal advantages, and whether something
 25 is advantage or disadvantage is decided by dominant
 26 power structures. In itself this is not necessarily a bad
 27 thing for society, but it certainly means it becomes hard
 28 to understand human behavior in its fullness since we
 29 generally make opportune selections of phenomena for
 30 study. I therefore think it to be paramount we embrace
 31 also the politically inopportune, and dare to focus on
 32 the yet little known that does not necessarily include
 33 the talents of “heroes” and “nerds”, but rather seek to
 34 understand “the martyrs” to achieve a more balanced
 35 understanding of human behavior and giftedness.

36 My last posed question: do we actually *want* gifted
 37 individuals in our midst? This question is also easy to
 38 answer in a sociobiological perspective. We want *cer-*
 39 *tain* kinds of gifted behaviors in our midst, namely the
 40 ones that either make us feel good in a variety of ways
 41 (entertainment) or the ones who by their skills support,
 42 maintain and develop current dominant power struc-
 43 tures (maintenance). But as soon as a gifted individual
 44 poses a threat of some kind, an entire range of reac-
 45 tions is triggered in the surrounding social context. The
 46 agents of change risk becoming stigmatized. A teacher
 47 may not like to be criticized by a gifted pupil and there-
 48 fore ignores him or her; a professor might not tolerate
 49 the fact that a doctoral candidate is much more bril-

liant than the professor and therefore holds back on
 information that might benefit the student; a manager
 might fire someone who is better suited to be manager
 than he or she is; a leading politician may backstab and
 speak derogatory of an opponent who seems to make
 better sense and have better solutions to a problem;
 and a regime might—as history demonstrates all too
 clearly—eliminate dissidents with too great a potential
 to topple current leaders or even the entire organization
 or political system.

Ten Hypotheses on Gifted Individuals in Different Social Contexts

Suggesting that giftedness has societal function, as
 based on a sociobiological framework, makes it possi-
 ble to also pose testable hypotheses regarding the fate
 of gifted individuals in certain contexts, for example,
 the following:

1. A gifted individual will be favored and promoted if
 their skills in some ways enhance the current power
 hierarchy of the group in which he or she exists.
2. The type of talent dictates social acceptance and in-
 terest or non-acceptance or negligence:
 - a) social maintenance functions will always be ac-
 cepted and tolerated;
 - b) social entertainment functions will always be
 accepted and tolerated, *unless*
 - c) social entertainment changes function into so-
 cial change and becomes a perceived threat to
 leaderships.
3. A gifted individual who takes on a function of so-
 cietal change is accepted and promoted by a group
 if what they propose or do is perceived as being or
 generating a tangible gain and is available not too
 distant into the future.
4. A gifted individual who takes on a function of so-
 cietal change is rarely accepted by a group if what
 they propose or do is perceived as a loss or gain too
 far away in time.
5. A gifted individual who takes on a function of soci-
 etal change is never accepted by authorities (leader-
 ship/s) if what they propose or do is perceived as a
 threat to his/her/their position in that hierarchy.

- 01 6. A gifted individual who takes on a function of soci-
02 etal change and is not accepted by authorities (lead-
03 ership/s) if what they propose or do is perceived
04 as a threat to his/her/their position in that hierar-
05 chy, will nevertheless be praised and commended
06 by outsiders, if the gifted individual is a proponent
07 of ideals and values adhered to by the out-group.
- 08 7. Stigmatization is a tool used to neutralize a gifted
09 individual in a context of societal change where the
10 gifted is seen by authorities (leadership/s) as a threat
11 to his/her/their position in that hierarchy.
- 12 8. Marginalization is a coping strategy employed by
13 gifted individuals in situations where they become
14 more or less stigmatized.

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