Delphi Model of Giftedness

An existential way of looking at giftedness in order to empower gifted people

Maud van Thiel and Noks Nauta

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: M. B. G. M. (Maud) van Thiel,

maudvanthiel@upcmail.nl

Other author: A. P. (Noks) Nauta, arnolda.nauta@gmail.com

Abstract

The article describes the development and the content of the Delphi Model of Giftedness. By means of the Delphi method twenty experts on giftedness were asked about the core features of gifted people. This resulted in an existential model of giftedness. The model is usable for the empowerment of the gifted, as well as for the public relations of the gifted as a group.

Introduction

Background

Gifted people tend to hide themselves. They don't call themselves 'gifted', nor want to *be* called like that. Gifted people try to avoid the label 'gifted' because of negative stereotypes dominating the public debate about giftedness. They don't want to be a nerd, a weirdo, a freak, an alien, an egghead, a know-it-all or an extraterrestrial. Many gifted people don't know what giftedness exactly means, nor why they should see themselves like that. Some were treated with disgust because of their giftedness and don't *dare* call themselves gifted anymore. Some internalized the negative stereotypes and feel slightly ashamed of being gifted., Gifted people who are successful and feel at ease with their giftedness, say they don't *need* to call themselves gifted. They don't see the advantage, the bonus, the surplus value.

Whether gifted people don't dare, don't want, or don't need to call themselves gifted, they all - including those who *do* want to call themselves gifted - are unable to delineate in a complete and consistent way the characteristics of giftedness, let alone that they could do it in positive terms.

Commission

The Dutch Giftedness Fund asked us to create *in collaboration with gifted people* a description of how it is to be gifted, what giftedness means, how giftedness senses - in short, how giftedness should be defined and perceived from an internal perspective. The Fund told us that scientific definitions of giftedness are not usable for the gifted themselves, because they are too difficult, too expanded, too inadequate, too colorless or - and this is important - too much burdened with a pressure to achieve. The scientific definitions of giftedness are not suitable to understand yourself as a gifted person, nor to explain and communicate to your environment your giftedness and all the characteristics connected to it. And finally they are of no use in improving the image of gifted people.

Importance

The availability of a clear, expressive and positive definition (ideal type) of giftedness is important in several ways. For the gifted person personally it is important to have a blueprint of a positive self-image. A self-

image which can help them flourish or handle their pitfalls. For the gifted and talented as a group it is important to have means (entrances) to influence the public opinion about giftedness. Being able to carry out a positive picture of yourself helps to create a social environment which is nourishing. And being understood, one can help society to get the best out of gifted citizens. Last but not least, the availability of a consistent map of characteristics of giftedness, created from inside the group of gifted people, is of ultimate use to researchers and professionals who have to deal with the people and the phenomenon.

Outline

The project, called 'Knowing Giftedness', started in 2006 and culminated in 2008 in a book for gifted people, their environment and professionals who work with gifted people. Designing together with and reaching consensus from within the group of gifted people about the ideal type of a gifted person (about a definition of giftedness) was reached in two ways. First, we organized a Delphi study among professionals and fieldworkers who, being gifted themselves, worked for many years (nearly) fulltime with gifted adults and gifted children. Parallel to and in interchange with this Delphi study the gifted public was invited, by means of the website of the Giftedness Fund, to define giftedness and to react on the results of *every phase* of the Delphi search. The information we obtained in this way was used as corrective to what the professionals came up with. Second, we organized a conference to present the results and to test the consensus about the definition of giftedness attained by the experts.

Criteria

The definition of giftedness created from inside the target group had to meet several criteria. It had to be:

-         created in a systematic way

-         meaningful and internally consistent

-         accepted by most of the members of the target group

-         usable for gifted people themselves and for outsiders

-         usable by youngsters as well as by adults and seniors

-         applicable to all areas of life (living, working, loving, studying)

-         neutral to positive by nature

-         short, preferably a one-liner

-         colorful, expressive, telling and stirring imagination

Method

Literature search

To find out whether a definition that met our criteria already existed, we examined literature. There proved to be several hundreds of definitions of giftedness. Best known are those by Renzulli (1977, 1978), Mönks & Span (1985) Heller (2000) and Sternberg & Davidson (2005). Mönks and Mason (2002) tried to classify this mass of definitions of giftedness by looking at the underlying conceptual model. Freely translated, they determined the following kind of definitions:

- biological definitions: giftedness is innate and congenital - one has it or not, it is not teachable, cannot be increased or enlarged (f.i. Dabrovsky, 1977)

- cognitive definitions: giftedness is a result of a learning process, a conglomerate of cognitive (most of the time intellectual) abilities like reasoning, analyzing, problem solving and memory (f.i. Resing and Drenth (2007), Sternberg in earlier publications)

- psychological definitions: giftedness is a conglomerate of personality characteristics like task commitment, creativity, wisdom, intensity, complexity, drive, inner experience and awareness (f.i. Renzulli, 1977, 1978; Sternberg in later publications, Jacobson, 1999)

- pedagogical (educational) definitions: giftedness is a process, an asynchronic development in need of support to crystalize

- achievement-oriented definitions: giftedness is only measurable by achievements - only individuals who continually perform at a (very) high level - perform excellently - deserve the label 'gifted' (f.i. Span, 2001; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005)

- systemic definitions: giftedness is not an individual achievement or an inborn gift, but the result of the interaction with the environment, including the factor 'luck' (f.i. Mönks & Span, 1985)

- sociological and anthropological definitions: giftedness is subject to the leading cultural values – what is gifted in one culture needs not to be gifted in another culture (f.i. Ziegler, 1997)

- comparative definitions: giftedness is defined in relation to non-giftedness, to normality - most of the time by determining the risks (f.i. Colangelo & Davis, 2003)

- domain specific definitions: giftedness is a multimorphic phenomenon - there are many kinds of giftedness, the best known is the classification of Gardner (1983, 1993)

    In summary, from literature we came to the following conclusions:

- many models and definitions concern children and their development

- some definitions consider 'highly gifted' and 'highly intelligent' as synonyms

- more often giftedness is considered a broader concept than intelligence

- most models look at giftedness from the outside

- achievement-oriented definitions dominate

- many definitions are not usable in daily practice, nor for the sake of public relations

There was no (kind of) definition which met the criteria we formulated. Only intensively rebuilding one or another definition could perhaps be helpful to attain our goal, but we had no idea in what direction this should be done. So we decided to go on - to start the Delphi study and find a new consensus definition.

Delphi study

The central question was to determine how gifted people see themselves and each other. What do they think are the outstanding features, the distinctive characteristics of gifted people? What do they think are the typical hallmarks of the species 'gifted people'? Assuming experts (fieldworkers and professionals who deal with gifted people) to possess implicit knowledge about nature and phenomenology of giftedness, we decided to dig up this information by means of the Delphi method (Häder & Häder, 2000). This is a method by which one consults a group of experts (the oracle - like the Delphi oracle in Greece). The experts are asked what they think about a theme, a plan, a situation etcetera, mostly in several rounds, including feedback about opinions and arguments. One of the benefits of the Delphi method is the excluding of group thinking in favor of giving room to deviant meanings and creative ideas. Another positive feature of the Delphi method is the possibility to reach consensus in difficult situations.

Twenty experts participated in five rounds. By means of structured questions they were asked to oracle about the features of gifted people *without consulting literature* - only relying on experience, intuition and *Fingerspitzengefühl.* In each round the role of the first researcher was to set the course, to raise new questions and sometimes cut knots. By means of giving back the results of the last round, the experts could correct the researcher and confront her with hiatus, wry arguments and misconceptions.

The twenty experts were chosen to represent the range of professionals that work with the gifted, like educational specialists, pedagogues, counselors, psychologists, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, jobcoaches, occupational physicians and human resource managers. Half of them dealt with children, half of them with adults. The Delphi study was carried out via internet and ran over a year. The questions in each new round were determined by the results of the former round. Every round gave birth to a mass of information, out of which we had to look for a core, a line, a pattern. The themes of the rounds were:

1.   listing the (core) elements of giftedness

2.   exploring adjoining and underlying concepts

3.   polishing and refining the emerging conceptual scheme

4.   trying to reduce the model by ranking and by grouping

5.   controlling the completeness of the model

Delphi rounds

First round

The first round resulted in about twelve pages of social, psychological, emotional and behavioral features held true for gifted people. We immediately skipped all the negative features. Eight pages remained. We also skipped contradictory features. Then we re-examined existing models, but none one of them covered all the material. Hereafter we brooded, simmered, chewed and ruminated all kinds of virtual compositions of variables in order to grasp the core content of what the experts had written about giftedness. We finally came up to a scheme we called an existential model. It depicted in verbs the most important aspects (and their interaction) of human existence in general. The aspects where virtually arranged in a way that shows the coherence and the mutual influence. All features mentioned by the experts fell easily in one of the categories (could be subsumed into one of the existential aspects). During all the following rounds we looked for overall adjectives that - in case of giftedness - portrait the distinct aspects best.

Second round

The second round was needed because of the emergence of related, underlying or synonymous concepts. We had to unravel a confusion of tongues concerning the words intelligent, gifted, talented, wise, sensible, smart, clever, skilled and competent. We had to take position at the issues of morality and spirituality. We principally refused to consider gifted people as beings of a higher moral standard than less gifted people. About spirituality, we see this as a field of application of one's giftedness. Spirituality is a skill in the area of religion, mysticism and transcendence. Furthermore we had to tackle the domain discussion about basically different forms of intelligence and giftedness. We decided *not* to follow Gardner (1983, 1993), who assumes different inborn brains for different gifted people. We instead see giftedness as a basic structure that can be applied to different fields and so - in the end - *becomes* different (physiologically as well as phenomenologically). Last but not least we had to tackle the controversy about 'showing achievements' as part of a definition. This was the most difficult part of the project, but we solved it as mentioned in the next paragraph.

Third round

In the third round we analyzed to the core all the terms, words and features that were mentioned. Doing so we struggled with synonyms, specifications (words of lower order) and combination terms (words of higher order). All in order to find the best fitting adjective for the way in which gifted people give color to all the existential aspects. Here we decided to *not* exactly define the variables of the model, but to lean on the more or less vague common sense meaning of words. The reason for this was that we were looking for a definition that could be used for the sake of public relations - a television commercial does not have footnotes with definitions of terms either. At the end of this round, we had eight adjectives left. Four adjectives were placed on the reserve bench.

Fourth round

In the fourth round we tried to diminish the twelve adjectives that remained, by asking the experts first to rank them from most important to less important and second to cluster them. This meant that we temporarily brought the structure of the model into question again. The result of the ranking was that two adjectives of the reserve bench got a place in the model. Grouping did not result in a better depiction of giftedness, because there was a great amount of overlap between the groups. Most of the time grouping gave way to former (and by argument rejected) models. Apparently the model was the best we could generate.

Fifth round

The last round was a controlling round. Assuming every positive characteristic to have a negative backside, and every negative characteristic to originally be a positive feature, we asked the experts to name the pitfalls, the exaggerations, the growing awry, the 'black sides' of all the (positive) terms in the model. To our great satisfaction, all of the negative features we skipped in the first round were 'recovered' and *none* was not mentioned. In this round we also proposed two translations of the model in full sentences. One was easily accepted.

Delphi Model

Structure

Eventually we constructed a model of giftedness all experts approved of, except the variable called 'creation-directedness'. We will discuss this below.

About here figure 1

Figure 1 outlines the model. One can detect the rudiments of earlier models. For example, the division between the inner world (the left green field), the outer world (the right green field) and (in the middle) the interaction between them. A human being is not a thing on its own. He or she exists in relation to, in exchange with the environment. There is something going out and something coming in: the person does (gives) things and receives (perceives) things. The way in which one does so, depends on what kind a person one is.

Over this basic scheme we unrolled a finer scheme. We called it an existential scheme (the brightly colored rectangles). Existential in the sense that *everybody* - gifted or not - in a simultaneous way 'exists' ('is'), 'thinks', 'feels', 'wants', 'does' ('acts') and 'receives' ('perceives'). The point is that *gifted* people color these existential aspects and the interplay between them (depicted in the ovals) in their own way. That speaks for itself, one would say. But remarkably, as far as we were able to see, in case of defining giftedness no one ever took this position. And even more remarkable, distinguishing between the aspects being, thinking, feeling, wanting, doing and receiving (and listening to the 'concert' of these aspects) turned out to be very fruitful.

Variables

As stated earlier, we searched for the best fitting, over-arching adjective for each existential aspect and for the music they make together. This led to the following list:

-        the 'being' of gifted people is most strongly colored by the adjective 'autonomous'

-        the 'thinking' is 'intelligent'

-        the 'feeling' is 'multi-facetted'

-        the 'wanting' is 'curious and passionate'

-        the 'receiving' is 'sensitive'

-        the 'doing' is 'creation-directed'

-        and the interplay between them is 'sparkling-original', 'fast and quick', 'intense' and 'complex'

The inner world

The *being* - the somewhat motionless being - of gifted people is best characterized by the word 'autonomous'. Gifted people are very independent and self-reliant. They make their own judgements, weigh their own arguments and stick with them, as long as nothing better shows up.

The *thinking* of gifted people is - needless to say - (highly) 'intelligent', in a cognitive way. Gifted people think analytically. Moreover, their thinking takes the shape of 'matrix thinking', which means that gifted people can think simultaneously on many levels, tracks and moments - they jump, so to say, easily from one point to another in a mental space. Gifted people also think about thinking, which is called meta-cognition and

which includes the ability to recognize and handle moral values. Highly intelligent thinking also means that patterns and structures are easily discovered, that there is a quick alternation of divergent and convergent thought, a strong associative power and an exceptional memory.

The *feeling*, the emotional inner world of gifted people, is best described as colourful, finely nuanced, closely interlaced, richly varied, to put it briefly 'multi-facetted'. The emotional life of gifted people often manifests as imagery. Gifted people can see entire paintings and scenes, they can even move through this three-dimensional 'reality', look at the objects in it from different sides and feel the atmosphere.

As with all people the thinking and feeling influence each other, and their interaction is in turn influenced by the overall state of being. This means that autonomy flavours the interaction between intelligence and the richly coloured inner world.

Exchange with the outer world

The *wanting* of gifted people is 'curious' and 'passionate'. Gifted people usually want a lot, preferably immediately, and preferably always something new. They are inquisitive, wish to discover things - in their own way, of course, because they are autonomous. They are restless and always looking for the next thing. When they've clung to something, they won't let go, and they are very persistent.

The *receiving* of gifted people can be called (highly) 'sensitive'. All senses of gifted people are always hyper-alert. Gifted people hear, see, feel, smell and taste everything. Their perception is defined by sharpness and precision. Everything arrives at once, in all its nuances, very detailed and with its full weight. And sometimes this stretches to feeling energies, perceiving vibes and psychic radiation.

Finally, the *doing* (acting) of gifted people is best characterized by the word 'creation-directed'. As mentioned, this adjective turned out to be the most controversial point among the experts. Eventually, rather more than 75% of the experts agreed to this term. In short we decided by majority that the acting of gifted people is *not* characterized by its attaining (impressive) achievements, but more by its being full of creative urge, of directedness towards creation. Gifted people are creative, and love to be creative. They are always designing, drafting, building something: a model, a process, a theory, a plan, a method, an analysis, an overview, an invention, an improvement, a game, an idea, a product, a puzzle, a painting, a piece of music. Occasionally, they create something that brings them fame. And even when it seems they are doing nothing, the gifted still are creative: they build 'in their heads' worlds of thoughts, structures, stories and images. The place of the rectangle with the word creation-directed is half in and half out of society, illustrating how not all 'products' of gifted people end up as 'achievements' in the outer world.

The interplay

When the whole circus is up and running and the gifted person is living his or her life, one can see still four other qualities referring to the interplay of the distinctive existential aspects. The gifted person, functioning in real life, is quick in every aspect. The 'system' sparkles and shines, radiates creativity, while everything is done with great intensity and based on - sometimes invisible - complexity.

The *quickness* one sees in gifted people is in all probability the result of the biological state of the nervous system. We can see speed in almost all aspects of the existence of gifted people. Stimulus enters quickly. An emotional world is soon made. Thinking is a high-speed processor. And the end product is quickly envisaged.

The *sparkling original* side of the gifted, functioning in real life, can be seen in the form of inventiveness, originality, the coming up with unexpected things and the making of unconventional connections. Gifted people are not only creative, but they *enjoy* being creative. And that gives them a sparkle, makes them alive and playful. The creative side comes out especially in thought, will and performance, but also in feeling and sometimes even in perception.

There is also *intensity*, everything happening at full throttle, with great heat. One of the experts said it this way: 'in a gifted person all controls are turned up to the maximum and turning them off is not easy'. To get an idea of this, try inserting the word 'very' in front of all the aspects of the model - 'very autonomous', 'very quick' etc.

And last, a gifted person is - in all aspects - a *complex* being, living a complex life, and capable of handling great complexity. A gifted person usually functions at different levels simultaneously - nothing is ever simple. Modest maybe, but not simple. Gifted people can certainly simplify things, but always from a complex starting point, a complex background.

Definition in words

At the end of the Delphi search we put the model into words and arrived at the following definition: *a gifted person is a quick and clever thinker, able to deal with complex matters. Autonomous, curious and passionate. A sensitive and emotionally rich individual, living intensely. He or she enjoys being creative.*

Reverse side

As said, the experts had to name the reverse sides (the black sides) of the terms mentioned in the model. In summary they generated the following list:

- too much autonomy can degenerate into extreme lonership, to anarchism, to kind of narcissism, to being not guidable, to being called arrogant, stubborn and pig-headed

- too much intelligence can slip into pedantry, into debating on purpose of the debate, into not being able to let bygones be bygones (because one remembers everything), into chaos (because the associative power cannot be handled)

- a too richly colored emotional life can give way to phantasm (believing one's own fantastic stories without keeping reality in mind), to illusions, 'lying' and even lunatic episodes, or to the feeling of being a pressure cooker of swirling emotions

- too much curiosity and passion can lead to restlessness, to manic episodes, to getting adrift, to overruling and overwhelming other people, to not respecting boundaries

- too much sensitivity leads to overstrung nerves, to concentration problems, to not being able to guard one's own boundaries

- too much creation-orientedness can deteriorate into never finish things (because the next project announces itself already) and into overloading the environment

- too much sparkling originality, inventiveness, innovation-mindedness and creativity can degenerate into irritating other people because they even didn't see there was a problem or because they were glad they solved the former problem, or to kind of jumping to conclusions without being able to rest a while at a problem or an emotion

- too much quickness and speed can lead to loneliness (because one always is ahead of the pack) and to misunderstandings

- too much intensity can lead to burn-out and frightening other people

- and too much complexity can entangle oneself by not being able to simplify, by pettiness, and by poisoning relationships because one skips continuously and easily from one subject to another

Discussion

Method

It was suggested that the experts were biased by their professionally being occupied with *problematic* gifted people. In our opinion this is outweighed by the fact that the experts themselves are successfully gifted persons who also have many (highly) successful friends. So during their life they were able to form an excellent picture of gifted persons in balance.

There was criticism on the role of the first researcher, because she could have been too steering and too controlling, we state in reply that the first researcher in each round gave back all that was written in the round before and the experts could read whether their input was taken in. Moreover, the expert group in its entirety was an extremely gifted group and it mercilessly pricked through errors, vaguenesses and misconceptions of the first researcher.

Another criticism was aimed at not defining the characteristics of gifted people exactly and mutually exclusive. We deliberately didn't do so, because we wanted to work with the implicit and common sense meaning of words and concepts, which have slightly alternating contents and more than one connotation.

A very strong point of the here applied variant of the Delphi method is the loop we created in the last round. We believe this gives the model a very sound base.

Results

A comment we often received was that the model would fit *all* people - gifted and not gifted. The model would thus be no more than a universal description of people living their lives. We parry this criticism by proposing to put the word 'very' ahead of every characteristic. Gifted people are characterized by the fact that they have *very much* of all the features mentioned in the model. This notion made us to consider a one-liner like: a gifted person is someone who is in all aspects 'very' - or something similar.

Reversely there was the criticism that there are so *many different* gifted people. It couldn't be possible to catch them all in one model. This we parry by calling the model an ideal-typical description. The description tells us how a normally grown up, adequate supported and well-balanced gifted person, that not yet chose for elaborating only one of his or her strong characteristics, would look like. Besides that, the model gives way to a great amount of different profiles of gifted people. On every characteristic one can 'score' (very) high or (relatively) low. This creates an endless amount of 'landscapes of giftedness'.

The next criticism is aimed at the *positive* approach of the model. In itself, the vast amount of negative statements in the first round is remarkable. It shows the strength of the negative stereotypes which exist even in those who are very tolerant to gifted people. In contrast to this we wanted to describe a gifted person in balance. Whereas Jacobson (1999) described giftedness from the perspective of pitfalls (collapse, trauma and exaggeration), we took the perspective of balance, of normality and so of potential strengths. Not in the least because many gifted people are so much in need of this - they can use it to develop a positive self-image and they can use it to confront ingrained prejudices.

Another point of criticism is aimed at the 'low' consensus reached. One out of four to five experts wanted to only name someone gifted, if he or she displays excellent performances - over a long time, provable and valued by society. First, a consensus percentage of 75 to 80 percent is very high in this kind of research. Second, the visitors of the conference were even more unanimous about the model. And third, the criterion is unworkable. For example, achievements might only be recognized after someone is dead. Or, an achievement may be valued in one culture and not in another. Or, someone becomes famous at the age of fifty - wasn't he or she *not* gifted before? And how about all the brilliant inventions that lay in a cupboard and never see the light?

Of course we have to look at the criteria we listed at the start of the project. We conclude that the definition is created in a systematic way, is meaningful and internally consistent, accepted by most of the members of the target group, usable for gifted people themselves and for outsiders, usable by youngsters as well as by adults and seniors, applicable to all areas of life (living, working, loving, studying etcetera), positive by nature, colorful, expressive, telling and stirring the imagination. The only point at which we failed was the criterion of shortness.

Acceptance and usability

They only intrinsic criticism which makes the model unacceptable for a small group of gifted people is the fact that we didn't include the variables 'moral high standard', 'high level of spirituality' and 'provable and valued achievements'. We explained this earlier.

On the contrary, since the publication of the Delphi Model of Giftedness in The Netherlands (Kooijman - van Thiel, 2008) many declarations of approval came to us. Many coaches and counselors work with the model. Mensa (The Netherlands) placed the definition on her website. Many gifted individuals, couples and families greeted the model with open arms. Up to now it seems to be a perfect instrument to help gifted people. The model can teach them about themselves, their parents and their children. Individuals react very emotionally when they eventually understand the difficulties in their life. Or when they realize that - by the model - they have an instrument to correct themselves, to explain themselves to colleagues or partners and to bring themselves to flourishing. When they have conflicts with friends or managers, when they feel like a stranger on this globe, when they are entangled in their own thoughts etcetera, the model shows gifted people where things went wrong. And in that case it also shows a way out, because with the help of the model one can switch (easily) between negative and positive characteristics.

Implications

First, taking the model for granted, it is possible to create an instrument that measures giftedness. Indeed, we are doing so. We are developing a questionnaire, as well as a temporary battery of existing instruments which together seem to give an indication of the extent of giftedness. In the end - if we can raise funds - we would like to create a new instrument alongside the Big Five and the IQ-tests.

Secondly, the model creates the opportunity to look for a clustering of gifted *profiles*. In our experience, there seem to be at least two clusters: gifted people scoring high on the variables in the upper part of the model and gifted people scoring high on the variables in the lower part of the model.

Authors

Maud van Thiel (Kooijman-van Thiel) (1955). Sociologist, specialized in methods of scientific research and in family affairs. Psychologist and psychotherapist, specialized in gifted adults. Formerly scientific researcher at University of Tilburg (Netherlands) and psychotherapist in mental health care. Currently Chair of the Foundation for Gifted and Talented Adults (IHBV) and owner of OYA Psychotherapy and Coaching for Gifted Adults.

Noks Nauta (1947), MD, psychologist, PhD. Freelance adviser and trainer. Working on gifted adults at work since 2001. Wrote several articles and a book with Sieuwke Ronner (Unguided missiles on track, 2007). Performs workshops and presentations for gifted adults and for professionals. Member of the Board of the Foundation for Gifted and Talented Adults (IHBV).

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