



## ANNOUNCEMENT

*A TRIBUTE TO LETA HOLLINGWORTH*

This year marks the golden anniversary of Leta Stetter Hollingworth's death, and from October 19-21, 1989, a commemorative celebration of the life and work of this great leader will be held at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, her alma mater. It is fitting that we recognize Dr. Hollingworth in this premier issue for several reasons: as the foremother of gifted education, as the first proponent of giftedness in women, and as an exemplar of advanced development.

Leta Hollingworth lived a life imbued with higher level values. She vowed as a child to devote her life to humanity and she lived in concert with those values. She worked tirelessly throughout her life, generously helping her family, students and the gifted children she studied. She was an inspiration to all who knew her, and for half a century, she has continued to inspire gifted educators and women psychologists.

The commemoration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has been designed to help us rediscover Leta Hollingworth so that she can inspire future generations. Major speakers include Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr., Thomas Fagan, Felice Kaufmann, Kathi Kearney, Barbara Kerr, Michael Piechowski, William Roweton, Stephanie Shields, Linda Silverman, Toni Santmire, Julian Stanley, and Abraham Tannenbaum.

The celebration includes an intimate symposium on Thursday evening and Friday, in which family, friends, students, and scholars from all over the United States will gather to share her poetry, her philosophy, her early life in Nebraska, her life at Columbia University, her contributions to psychology, gifted education, highly gifted and the study of women, and the personal inspiration she has been to so many. Saturday will be a major conference to share her contributions to school psychology, counseling and gifted education.

Participants will learn how Carl Rogers' client-centered therapy was derived from Hollingworth's child-centered therapy; how she established the equality of women's intelligence in the eyes of science; how her idea of off-level testing inspired Julian Stanley to initiate the Talent Search; how she conducted the first major studies of the highly gifted and gifted children with learning disabilities; how she brought bibliotherapy into gifted education; how she helped gifted students design their own curriculum; and how she laid the groundwork for our understanding of the emotional development of gifted children.

Please join us for this gala event. For information about the conference, please contact Dr. N. S. Griffin, Coordinator, Gifted Education, 202 MLH, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588-0143 (402) 472-1701.

## Adjustment of Gifted Adults

**Nancy Alvarado**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The potential difficulties associated with being highly intelligent or creative are examined, based upon naturalistic study of members of Mensa, as well as research, case studies, and biographical material. The different world view and assumptions of gifted adults are examined, and a different standard for judging normality is proposed. Internal and external conflicts and coping styles of the gifted are described, stressing the need for such adults to develop a coherent self-identity and group-identity.*

As Gracie Allen used to say, "You've got to take the bitter with the better." Highly intelligent or creative adults may experience their gifts in both positive and negative ways. The positive aspects of high intelligence and talent receive plentiful attention. They are the traits most likely to attract positive notice in our society and have been the major focus of researchers. An overemphasis on the positive aspects of being gifted does a disservice to the many gifted adults who are experiencing difficulties. It discounts their personal experience and places another expectation upon them: to be gifted, they must have better than average mental health, greater stability, better coping skills. Believing the gifted to be in little need of help, schools and clinicians may be less likely to develop support services and expertise, and a group very much at risk may continue to be ignored.

The historical context of the study of genius and giftedness has encouraged today's overemphasis on the positive side of giftedness. Grinder (1985) described the past, overly negative picture of giftedness that leads today's researchers to portray the gifted in a more normal light.

The definition of giftedness has also been expanded to include groups not formerly encompassed by terms such as "genius" or "prodigy." Now that academic achievers, social leaders, and those with IQs in lower ranges (120-140) are encompassed by the term gifted, it is not surprising that the group is looking more like the general population, when examined collectively.

Unfortunately, as the term gifted has been redefined through classification procedures in school districts (and in the samples used in studies selected from such programs), insufficient care has been taken to carefully define who is being studied and reported upon. A group that includes a range of students from 120

to 180+ IQ may produce general findings that fail to accurately describe either the low range or the high range, as Foster (1986a), Polkinghorne (1983), and others have pointed out in their criticisms of the use of quantitative methods with divergent populations.

I suspect that the traits, thinking styles, and adjustment difficulties that those with very high IQs (> 150) experience are quite different from those of gifted children closer to the norm (< 150). Further, I believe that personality and environment, as well as native endowment, all interact to produce an experience of giftedness that is different for each individual. But the adjustment difficulties of highly intelligent individuals have recurring similarities. This article is a first step in acknowledging that giftedness is not an unmixed blessing and focusing attention upon the common difficulties of those who are highly gifted.

Information in this article is based upon a variety of sources, beginning with my own experiences as a highly gifted child and adult. For the past 9 years I have been a participant-observer within Mensa, a group whose only criterion for membership is a score in the top 2% on a standardized intelligence test. I held several different offices within Mensa at the local level, was Mensa's national gifted children program coordinator, and served on a variety of local and national committees. This brought me into contact with hundreds of members across the country and provided access to the newsletters of 150 local groups.

This article also is based upon wide reading of literature on the psychology of high intelligence, case studies of highly intelligent individuals, biography and fiction written by authors who are themselves highly intelligent—an excellent example of which is *Martin Eden*, the semi-autobiographical novel by Jack London (1970).

### A Label That Doesn't Stick

I have observed that many gifted adults have no idea that they are more intelligent than the norm. This means that they must face problems related to high intelligence without realizing the source of these problems. Having missed the routine screening that is identifying today's gifted children, highly intelligent adults may know they are different from average, yet not realize why. Conarton and Silverman (in press) describe gifted middle-aged women who wonder whether they are insane or feel they have serious social and adjustment problems, rather than identify themselves as brighter than average. This pattern is repeated in Mensa, where many adults are surprised to discover that they are eligible for membership, having never considered themselves exceptionally intelligent.

One study examining this phenomenon was conducted by Brim, Glass, Neulinger, Firestone, and Lerner (1969). They found that the higher the IQ, the more critical an individual was of his or her own abilities, and the more likely to underestimate them. Similarly, autobiographies of eminent and talented adults almost routinely disclaim extraordinary intelligence or ability, settling for "bright-

ness" even when such a claim is patently absurd. Perhaps, because gifted individuals set high internal standards for themselves rather than comparing themselves to others, as most people do, they are more harsh in their self-judgments and are less likely to consider themselves exceptional.

As a recurring theme in various parts of the country, members of Mensa report that they consider most other members of the group to be smarter than they are, even when little evidence indicates that this should be so. Many members say they were admitted to the group only on a fluke and fear they would never pass another admittance test. They joke about having "cheated" on the entrance exam or "lucked into a good score." The Mensa "retest" is a running joke in the organization, and I believe that it reflects the uneasiness of group members with considering themselves highly intelligent.

### A Different World View

The major source of problems for gifted adults, I believe, is their different life view and inner environment. A wide variety of studies is showing that intellectually gifted people think differently than most people. Sternberg and Davidson (1985) have described several of these in their review of the cognitive development of the gifted.

Classroom experiences of teachers also suggest that gifted children have different problem-solving and learning styles; and multi-factor analyses of WISC test scores reveal different question-answering patterns between gifted and non-gifted groups (Sternberg & Davidson, 1985). Most compelling are the self-reports, case studies, biographies and autobiographies describing the complex inner life of the gifted. Authors such as Jane Austen, James Joyce, and Honore de Balzac speak quite eloquently for themselves. Goertzel and Goertzel (1962) have analyzed these inner lives collectively, as have Piechowski and Tyska (1982) individually, in their study of Eleanor Roosevelt.

These studies from a variety of perspectives suggest that high IQ is not simply more of the basic mental ability that everyone has but, instead, a difference in process and approach. Foster (1986b) has suggested an emergence theory for intelligence. Just as water changes properties and becomes steam when it is heated enough, intelligence may change properties when it reaches a critical point. Therefore, gifted individuals not only think faster or remember more, but the gifted also learn differently, react differently, approach problems differently, and are concerned with different ideas. Hollingworth (1942) suggested that these differences occur around 145 IQ.

### Problems of the Gifted

Biographers focus upon accomplishments, peripherally describing the great poets, writers, statesmen, scientists, and artists as anything but easy to be

around (Albert, 1983). Sigmund Freud's perpetual shedding of disciples is only one example (Jones, 1963). Goertzel and Goertzel (1962) describe many others. Eminent individuals seem to be exceptionally difficult people—headstrong, opinionated, antagonistic, idiosyncratic, and hypersensitive. Many of them lead tormented lives, never satisfied with their accomplishments, seldom recognized by their peers, always struggling to realize their inner vision. Many of them also are highly eccentric, with odd quirks, physical ailments, fears and prejudices (Goertzel & Goertzel, 1962).

Many authors suggest that giftedness is related to personality as well as to intellectual functioning (Piechowski, 1979). Lovecky (1986) cites five traits that produce potential interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict: divergency, excitability, sensitivity, perceptivity, and entelechy (motivation). She provides detailed descriptions of how each of these traits might be expressed in both positive and negative ways.

When expressed negatively, Lovecky's list of traits appear as behaviors that could be labelled clinically as neurotic. Such behaviors occur frequently enough in Mensa to be a serious concern to the more average membership. The organization is remarkably tolerant of divergent behavior, yet worries about the image and effect of its more eccentric members. Instead of debating whether this sort of behavior is typical, I suggest that we, like Mensa, reexamine whether this behavior is or should be considered pathological.

Dabrowski (1964) considered the seemingly neurotic behavior of highly intelligent individuals to be a normal precondition to the higher levels of personality development, richer internal environment, and broader moral concerns to which they aspire. He claimed that as long as the gifted combine neurotic traits with self-awareness and striving toward personal goals, their symptoms are not of poor adjustment but of health. He believed that the turmoil is necessary to reach the more complex developmental levels of which the gifted are capable. *It is normal for the gifted to appear abnormal.*

Normality usually is measured against the standard of behavior most common in a community. As Dabrowski (1964) has described, the normal traits for our society include practical rather than theoretical thinking, concern for the self and family rather than society. Like Freud, Dabrowski considered the average person to be primarily motivated by self-preservation, sexual, adventurous, and social instincts. He believed that the average person adheres to group thinking and behavior, with some petty larceny, which Dabrowski called "safe dishonesty." Such a person is considered mentally healthy. But Dabrowski considered a more suitable definition of mental health to include, in addition to average values, exemplary ones.

Dabrowski described the ways in which outstanding individuals tend to be very different from this average standard for judging mental health. In addition to showing accelerated development in one direction or another, they may behave in ways that a psychologist might consider psychoneurotic. According to Dabrowski, they may have one-sided skills, unusual attitudes or modes of

expression, and difficulty in perceiving reality. Their mental tension may be displayed in nervous symptoms. Not all gifted individuals may show these traits, but enough do to warrant description.

In particular, Dabrowski considered creative adults to be at odds with traditional notions of mental health. He considered the ability to take new and original approaches to reality to be connected in some individuals with periods of emotional crisis, inner conflicts, and difficult life experiences that seem to demand "turbulence" in the inner environment. Dabrowski's point is that what appears to be immature or mentally unbalanced may simply indicate creativity, not a mental problem.

## Societal Expectations

Often, gifted adults get into difficulties with others without realizing why they are having trouble. Willings (1980) reports that many gifted individuals assume that everyone else is just like they are. When they discover that this is not so, they are shocked and their attempts to account for the differences frequently lead them astray. They do not understand themselves, how others perceive them, or why they receive negative reactions. But they do recognize that others' reactions to them are frequently negative, and they are hurt by these responses. Intellect isn't much help in sorting this out, though highly intelligent adults frequently try to find logical reasons for their problems.

Many Mensans believe that they often evoke (or provoke) a thinly concealed, hostile reaction in their interactions with others. They often attribute this to jealousy or feelings of inferiority in others. I think it results partly because the gifted are different, partly because they are threatening, and partly because they remind others of their own deficiencies. Webb, Meckstroth, and Tolan (1982) have listed some adjectives applied to children with high IQs: "different, out of step, manipulative, show-offs who always know the answers, stubborn, insensitive to others, likely to question ways of doing things, aggressive, weird, anti-social, conceited, bossy, disrespectful, preoccupied with themselves, not willing to do things the traditional way, undisciplined" (p. 18).

Willings (1980) has described the problems that creative adults experience in the workplace. He found that their attitude is not "I'm smarter than everyone else," but, rather, "Why is everyone else so stupid?" The gifted do not understand why the world is so poorly organized and so inefficiently run. This misunderstanding may be coupled with rejection by peers, supervisors, or teachers; inability to perform intellectually unstimulating work; perfectionism; taking oneself too seriously; a sense of failure early in life; frustration with procedures; remoteness; temperamentalism, or lack of discipline; and failure at jobs that those of lesser ability do well (Willings, 1980).

Based on my observations with Mensans, the internal and external difficulties resulting from high intelligence or creativity are experienced as life problems that can be categorized as follows:

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- identity confusion
- low self-esteem
- perfectionism
- underachievement
- loneliness and isolation
- misdirected energy (self-defeating behavior)
- conflicts with authority
- emotional oversensitivity
- inadequate coping ability.

I define these as problems only to the extent that they are troubling or limiting to the individual, not because they may be a concern to society or because they fit certain classifications of symptoms. The gifted are not the only ones to suffer from loneliness, low self-esteem, or the variety of problems listed. But, I believe the gifted experience these problems differently and for different reasons than the general population does.

Finally, I think differentness itself is a problem. Like all minorities and exceptional populations, the gifted must deal with a society that is not geared to their needs and concerns. Gifted children and their parents must cope with many of the same emotional reactions and adjustment problems as physiologically handicapped or mentally retarded children do (Alvarado, 1986). As adults, the gifted are a subculture within a dominant culture, often without realizing it. They must cope with identity issues, just as other minority groups do. I think this is more complicated for gifted adults because they frequently do not recognize the source of their difficulties and thus cannot consciously address them.

## Coping Styles

Gifted adults must understand and accept themselves as gifted adults, with the advantages and disadvantages that brings. Until they do that, their relationships with others will be needlessly complicated. Too often, the gifted waste energy trying to be like others, living in ignorance of their potential, and wondering why it is so difficult for them to do what comes naturally to those around them. Personal suffering and unhappiness result from leading a distorted existence. From their comments and writings, I think many gifted adults sense this, but do not know what is wrong or how to fix it.

The problems of gifted adults are further complicated if helping professionals (counselors, therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists) fail to recognize the issues that the gifted struggle with and fail to evaluate their behavior against a baseline of what is normal for them—a population that is far from the norm in so many key respects. Unless they do so, professionals may interpret the normal traits of gifted individuals as pathology, or discount their difficulties. Gifted adults

need help with existential issues and can benefit from therapeutic approaches that help them accept their differences, not eliminate them. *The goal for gifted adults is not to approximate normality but, rather, to find commonality with others while maintaining individual integrity.*

Achievement pressure, a problem for gifted children, continues into adulthood. Because the gifted are capable of more, they seem to be expected, by others and by themselves, to achieve more. When their gifts are threatening, the gifted may be encouraged to achieve less, setting up a conflict or double-bind. Gifted adults must differentiate between the goals they set for themselves and those they internalize—the goals of those around them. To be productive, gifted adults must resolve conflicts between their own achievement or expressive needs and the expectations of parents, teachers, spouses, or society.

Clinicians and creative adults both describe a sense of fragility related to creative expression or intuition. They may consider unhappiness inseparable from creation, as the price to be paid for their genius or as an atonement for it. Sometimes they believe that tampering with their internal balance will disrupt their creativity or somehow jinx their abilities. Such adults do not seek resolution of their difficulties and may distrust normalcy.

Other gifted adults interpret any attempt to conform to the demands of society as a “sell-out.” They refuse to accommodate others because they believe it dishonest, manipulative, or weak-willed to compromise. The very word “compromise” may seem to be a dirty word. Often, highly intelligent adults fear that becoming well adjusted and in step with society will prevent them from pressing the changes that must be made if society is to survive. These gifted adults fear contamination if they attempt too close an accommodation with others.

Some gifted individuals appear to be more successful than others. This outward appearance of adjustment is related to the coping style the gifted adult adopts. Betts and Neihart (1988) catalog the coping styles of gifted children. For adults, I translate these into three styles: approach, avoidance, and compromise. As Betts describes, the coping style may vary in different situations, depending on the circumstances, but one style will tend to predominate over time. I think an appearance of achievement may be misleading and may not necessarily indicate a positive acceptance of one's giftedness.

## The Approach Style

Those who choose the approach coping style are often the high achievers. They whole-heartedly accept the demands of others and put full energy into satisfying them. These highly competitive and perfectionistic high achievers seem to have everything going for them, but many succumb to stress-related diseases, nervous breakdown, midlife crisis, or they may attempt suicide. Then they may switch to the second coping style, avoidance. Some are able to keep it going indefinitely but may take little pleasure in their accomplishments and find little creativity, interest, or enjoyment in their endeavors. They often feel like failures

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no matter what they have achieved, because they do not acknowledge much less accomplish their own personal goals.

Many underachievers also have chosen the approach coping style. This may not be obvious because they are oriented toward peers and social acceptance rather than academic or career achievement. They suppress visibility of their gifts, applying their talents toward blending in with their classmates, co-workers, and friends (Silverman, 1986). By underplaying their gifts in school, they wind up in unchallenging careers that put them out of touch with a compatible peer group. These underachievers never quite fit in with most of the people they meet, no matter how skillfully they try to adjust to the common denominator, so they lose the satisfaction of achievement as well as the acceptance they seek from others.

Many times these underachievers are unaware of the full extent of their abilities and thus have lost themselves. Or they may be aware of the extent of their underachievement but think it is too late to do anything about it. In either case, their self-esteem suffers. They may take out their disappointment on those around them, becoming angry and bitter. As parents, they may resent and sabotage achievement of their children, or they may become overinvested in their children's accomplishments.

### **The Avoidance Style**

Those who choose the avoidance coping style resolve the conflict between their giftedness and their environment by withdrawing. They may devote themselves entirely to an interest or to their work, preferring it to the disappointments of human companionship and finding satisfaction and recognition there that is difficult to find elsewhere. Excessive reading, work, or hobbies may be such a refuge, unrecognized as withdrawal because the activity seems worthwhile.

A pattern of withdrawal in childhood prevents adults from overcoming shyness and self-involvement and developing the social skills needed to form satisfying relationships in later life, when compatible friends are finally available. Without finding ways to gain social acceptance, these individuals may accept and introject derogatory labels such as "nerd" and "brain." More recently, "right-brained" has been added to the list of self-putdowns.

Another form of avoidance is conflict with "the system." Some gifted individuals deliberately provoke or seek out opportunities for conflict, rejecting others and ensuring rejection where acceptance might otherwise be found. They rebel against the values, competency, and expectations of home or school and, later, work and community. Intellect may become a defensive weapon. They may constantly criticize those in authority, insist on pursuing a "better" procedure, make grand but self-defeating gestures, based on principle, that are designed to show others as hypocritical, incompetent, or villainous. They also may exaggerate idiosyncrasies and exhibit eccentricity that prevents others from making contact, or be so blatantly "honest" in appraisals that no one wants to risk being judged. These are all methods of keeping others at a distance while protecting self-esteem.

Unfortunately, this coping style loses more in the long run than it gains temporarily, especially when an individual is applauded for upholding standards, showing strong individuality, or sticking to a principle. Often the principle is trivial, a better way could have been found, and the real goal was to maintain a distance from others.

### **The Compromise Style**

The third coping style, compromise, seems the most useful for the gifted adult, but it also is the most difficult to use. It employs constructive engagement with others to allow everyone concerned to accomplish individual objectives — the classic "win-win" situation. It does not sacrifice the needs of the individual to the group, as does the approach coping style. Nor does it sacrifice the needs of the group to the individual, as in the avoidance coping style.

Use of this third approach is no accident of birth but, instead, the result of acquired skills that gifted adults should be encouraged to learn. It also springs from an inner acceptance of themselves as gifted adults that allows them to express the full range of their abilities.

### **Developing a Group Identity**

Like all human beings, gifted adults need a group identity in order to be productive. But this must be based on a true peer group, not a forced affiliation with others that has little basis for commonality. Developing such an identity is complicated because many gifted adults are striving to realize an idealized self-image, and they recoil when they see their own problems reflected by other gifted adults. They want to associate only with those who will enhance their own opinion of themselves. Like other minority groups, they demand perfection from their own kind, hoping that society will become more accepting of them.

This dynamic occurs repeatedly in Mensa as new members attend a function hoping to bask in the reflected stature of famous writers, scientists, doctors, or lawyers. Instead, they enter a room filled with people very much like themselves, and they are disappointed with the perceived social misfits, underachievers, and opinionated fools they have met. In fact, Mensa functions are attended by a large number of famous writers, scientists, doctors, and lawyers, as well as athletes, inventors, artists, and those in idiosyncratic careers such as belly-dancing or chimney-sweeping. Because Mensa members do not identify themselves by their eminence or occupation, they are judged by their personalities.

This phenomenon of self-rejection is ironic because the divergent personality traits of gifted adults may be the strongest uniting factor in a group that expresses and applies its abilities in an almost limitless range of fields. Woody Allen, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Eleanor Roosevelt may be more alike in their inner turmoil than in their expressed abilities. It may also be that personality and process are too subtle a common ground, while mutual difficulties are more obvious.

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Gifted adults cannot wait until society develops a more accepting view of them before they are willing to "come out of the closet." They must actively revise the opinion society holds by being open, whole, and unashamed. To do this, the gifted must accept each other, with their problems, and help each other. They will not succeed by pretending to be normal. Professionals can help them by recognizing and clarifying the issues and helping them develop communication and coping skills. As Dabrowski (1964) urged, we must not humiliate humanity by depriving it of its exemplary individuals, regardless of whether the rest of humanity is ready to accept them.

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# Giftedness as Multilevel Potential:

## A Clinical Example

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**ABSTRACT:** This article presents an example of the application within clinical counseling of the Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD), a theory of emotional development. TPD offers a unique perspective that can be used to identify and counsel gifted individuals. When emphasis is placed on the individual's overall emotional development, counselors can take a new role in working with gifted. A tapescript is presented in which the counselor applies TPD principles to the client, Sara, a gifted college student. The tapescript is interrupted at points to explain how the counselor is utilizing the theory.

Identifying and counseling gifted individuals, like any other professional activity, requires a theory. Otherwise work is haphazard and data cannot be organized in a way to permit evaluation of outcomes. A theory tells us what deserves attention. We need a framework that suggests which behaviors are important and why. The Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) provides a framework that is particularly relevant for understanding the complex personalities of the gifted.

This theory was conceptualized by Kazimierz Dabrowski (1948; 1964), a Polish M.D. and clinical psychologist who taught for many years at the University of Alberta in Canada. His study of eminent and creative individuals played a major role in formulating the theory. Dabrowski (in Dabrowski, Kawczak, & Piechowski, 1970) maintained that the ultimate direction and control of behavior is located in the emotional, rather than the intellectual function. This new perspective leads us, then, to emphasize the strength and evolution of the emotional lives of gifted individuals if we want to affect their behavior and help them nourish their talents and their own development.

In the following tapescript, the counselor (C) applies the principles articulated by Dabrowski's theory to the situation of Sara (S), a gifted college sophomore seeking help. Familiarization with some of the basic principles of TPD outlined in Nelson's and Hague's articles in this journal will be helpful to