

Emotional Intelligence of the Gifted

I've been thinking about EQ, or emotional intelligence, as people have been recommending that I do so. In Chapter 3 of Daniel Goleman's popular book on the subject, *Emotional Intelligence*¹, he gives some examples of high IQ people who are not achieving the heights they were destined for. He says that "Academic intelligence has little to do with emotional life" and goes on to say "...people with high IQs can be stunningly poor pilots of their private lives." He believes that emotional intelligence and IQ are independent of each other. Goleman does a good job of showing that success comes to those who have an awareness of social rules and apply them in the dominant mode of their society. I think his observation that people with high IQ may have low emotional intelligence and therefore lower success is flawed. For starters, he defines success largely in social terms, a narrow band of achievement that gifted people may or may not choose to pursue.

I suggest that because the person with high IQ is actually hyper-aware their world, they are not receiving the same information about any given situation as someone within the normal range. Because of this, they will react differently. They are able to discern more complexity in any situation, and social situations are the most complex systems humans encounter. Imagine being asked to play 50 games of chess at the same time – but some of them are re-enactments of past games, and some are premonitions about possible future games. A gifted person can be consciously "playing chess" of this type during group interactions, and not surprisingly can become easily overwhelmed or start to avoid social settings to minimize the stress.

In people with emotional overexcitabilities², the scale of their reaction will also be different. Crying at toilet paper commercials might be quite within the range of normal for the gifted, yet for the majority of the population it would suggest depression or another mental illness. Additionally, their mental processing skills sometimes extend to emotional processing. I recall being called "ice princess" after viewing a movie about the last days of a man with cancer, including his death. Others were crying, but I felt no emotional turmoil because the movie clearly showed that he was at peace with himself at the end. I was already past grief, but I started to cry with the frustration of being so misunderstood.

The idea I think that the whole EQ industry needs to be very careful not to promote is that the most usual way to react emotionally is the best way, and if you don't react this way you need to work at doing so. In this way you will fit in and be a success in the eyes of the world. Not only the gifted, but also people with varying cultural backgrounds are victims of this prejudice towards the norm.

However, this is a prejudice that many gifted people face. So what to do? I learnt a set of basic emotional expectations, canned ways to react that I knew would be acceptable to most people. In the same way Goleman is saying that people from neglectful or abusive families never learn this social vocabulary, neither do some gifted kids. For someone used to a big emotional range and the power to instantly adapt to new information, the

fact that other people can't do the same needs to be accepted in the same way as their intellectual difference.

Although some of the skills Goleman talks about might come easily to gifted kids (socially valued skills like task commitment, delayed gratification, and goal pursuit) they just as easily may show behaviours that he believes show poor emotional intelligence. In reality, that's only one of the many possible causes, or sets of causes, for stubbornness, indecisiveness, or delinquency in a gifted person.

The gifted person may be very good at learning social rules, but having examined them closely, may decide that they are simply wrong. Parents, teachers, and bosses who have gifted people in their charge notice that their authority is repeatedly challenged and justification requested. But these kinds of rules are self-reinforcing and highly resistant to change³.

It's really hard to believe that you are so different from everyone else that you actually need to learn how to fit in. And it's frustrating to learn a laundry list of appropriate reactions, and be "working" to apply them in social situations where most others can just relax and be themselves. But it is essential that gifted people know about EQ and how it fits into their lives, so that they do not become alienated and distrustful of people and organizations, and vice versa. This, rather than the high IQ itself, is what can reduce a gifted child's potential to find success by the standards of modern society.

But why should the gifted have to adjust to everyone else? Why can't everyone else adjust to them? The way I look at it is being respectful; it is natural to facilitate communication by speaking (verbally and non-verbally) a common language. If the gifted are the ones with greater knowledge of the problem, it is incumbent upon them to make the required accommodation. However, it is important to provide for yourself or your gifted child a community in which natural emotional ranges are accepted, enjoyed, and reciprocated. Otherwise a great loneliness may set in that is very hard to break.

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¹ Goleman, D., (1995). When Smart is Dumb, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*, (pp33-pp45), Bantam Books, New York, N.Y.

² See <http://www.stephanietolan.com/dabrowskis.htm> for a general explanation of this term.

³ Postman, N., and Weingartner, C., *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, Dell Publishing Co Inc, New York, N.Y.