

Extreme Intellectual Ability and the Dynamics of Social Inclusion

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Abstract

While it is easy to include gifted into society individuals representing the social functions of maintenance or entertainment, it is much more challenging to fully include brilliant intellectuals, who can potentially change society and its power structure by their insights. This paper presents the theory and research underpinning various aspects social evolutionary dynamics in relation to many years of giftedness and talent scholarship to understand the dynamics of social inclusion; and the social inclusion of gifted and talented individuals in particular. As based on well-established empirical research from a multitude of disciplines, the conclusion of this paper was that societal attitudes toward the intellectually gifted may, to some extent, certainly be influenced for the better by social policy as well as by the education of the general public. However, importantly, existing research suggested that educating the gifted and talented themselves is also necessary. They too need an understanding of who they are in the light of social evolutionary dynamics; they need to learn why the world around them sometimes reacts aversively even though they are brilliant, and generally benevolent and socially responsible and they constitute considerable, yet often ignored, assets to all of society as a whole.

Keywords: Intellectual giftedness; social inclusion; social function; social cohesion; ability climate.

Introduction

For as long as an attempt has been made to study high ability systematically, researchers have not only marvelled at the extraordinary abilities of a relatively small group of individuals in any population, they have also been baffled by their frequent reluctance to demonstrate their prowess to others. It is not uncommon for this group to both hide their abilities and at the same time refuse to accept that they are different from almost everyone else (Foust, Rudasill & Callahan, 2006).

While this phenomenon has been known for some time no-one has yet investigated why this is the case. If the assumption is that being different by way of extraordinary skills and abilities, and that being extraordinary is attractive to society and therefore easily included in any social context for its benefits, then why do such remarkable individuals try to deny their own nature and pretend to be someone they are not? This is a phenomenon paralleled in any instance where an individual perceives him or herself as too dissimilar to the majority of their social context such as, for example, is the case

with gay and lesbian lifestyles, where ‘feeling different than others’ is a common theme prior to finally accepting one’s identity (cf., Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996). Hence, the phenomenon is *not* unique to the gifted and talented. The common denominator of individuals hiding or refusing to accept certain aspects of themselves is the perception of being *unacceptably* different. It also does not matter how they are different.

Although social inclusion a difficult aspect of modern society to fully implement, it is nevertheless a basis for a democracy proper (Canal, 2010; Fotopolous, 1997). This paper is an effort to explain this behavioural phenomenon on the basis of social evolution as we currently know it, particularly in relation to the extreme skills and abilities that constitutes to gifted and talented behaviour. Understanding the dynamics which govern our unaware desire to be like most others throws important light on extreme behaviour and the issue of inclusion into the social fabric of mainstream society.

Defining social inclusion

Importantly, social inclusion is *policy*. The World Bank (2013) describes social inclusion as a political act of *affirmative action*, defining it as ‘the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society,’ and also as ‘the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of people, disadvantages on the basis of their identity, to take part in society’ (p. xxiv). Policies, however, no matter how well-intended and morally justified, all share one fundamental aspect. They express ideology which rarely, if ever, originates in first asking whether a policy objective is fully attainable. Yet, without striving for evidence-based decisions and guidelines, policies are regularly enshrined into law, leaving the disconcerting possibility of establishing a legal canon that is not necessarily based on normal human behaviour. If so, policies cannot be fully upheld in practical terms no matter how hard well-intending citizens try (cf. Walsh & Ellis, 2003). For a policy to actually work, it needs to be based on principles generating social cohesion; that is, known behaviours and aspects of everyday life that are able to generate togetherness. One indication that social inclusion might be a good policy regardless, is that society appears to function optimally if rules of equality always apply (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010; 2018), but social inclusion is also a vision of society that does not always pan out as envisioned. Consider the many published reports on how complete social inclusion can disrupt schoolwork and present teachers with formidable, and not infrequently unsolvable, challenges (Kaufmann & Hallahan, 1995).

Social cohesion and the challenge of the extreme

Even though cultures vary in their orientation toward collectivism and individualism—an orientation at least in part influenced by national wealth (Gorodnichenko & Gerard, 2011; Hofstede, 2001)—humans constitute a social species functioning to varying degrees by co-operation. Our most fundamental prerequisite for survival over time is to belong to, to be able to identify with groups large and small, and also to be able to co-operate with one another in a variety of ways for the benefit of everyone associated with the group (Baumeister, 2012; Bowles & Gintis, 2011). To co-operate social cohesion is necessary. The factors that make groups stick together are well known. They are, for example, conformity, shared values and norms, maximum group size, group success in comparison to other groups and perceived common threats (see Persson, 2018, for a literature review). In addition, it is also well known that what makes a group feel threatened, dissolve or change, namely when members do not conform with, or even ignore, commonly respected norms, as well as when groups grow too large (Crocker & Quinn, 2003; Dunbar, 1992). Detrimental to cohesion is also any form of cheating, competition or rivalry between members of the same group (see Persson, 2020, for a literature review). This is often also true if one group member is perceived by others as being much more intelligent than the others are. This is at least the conclusion of scholars investigating the effect of extreme IQ and group cohesion (Judge, Colbert & Ilies, 2004). ‘It is dysfunctional for a leader’s intelligence to substantially exceed that of the group he or she leads,’ they concluded; ‘this suggests that group intelligence moderates the relationship between leader intelligence and leader effectiveness ... group members simply do not like leaders whose intellect far exceeds their own’ (p. 549).

In short, one inescapable requirement of every member of any group is that in order to become, or remain, a full and accepted member, is to be reasonably *similar* to everyone else, or at least not to be too dissimilar. Even if groups and cultures vary in regard to what is permissible behaviour there are always limits to what is considered unacceptable. One example of how different certain behaviours are construed between cultures is the perceived value of individual achievements. In much of the Western World, and particularly in an American context, individual efforts of self-interest tend to be revered, even required at some point in everyone’s career (Stewart & Bennet, 1991).

In many parts of Asia, the opposite is true. Such self-interest is frowned upon and is perceived as selfish and foreign to the social fabric of society. This is not to say that there is no individual self in collective cultures, but individual achievements must always aim for the benefit of others rather than for the sole benefit of the single individual (Greenwood, 2003; Kitayama, Markus, Masumoto & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Plath, 1980).

If similarity, then, is key to acceptance and tolerance in any society, and if social cohesion is a fundamental requirement of any co-operating group, what bearing has this on understanding the social inclusion into mainstream society of highly able individuals with extreme abilities and skills.

The functional differentiation of high ability

There are numerous labels used to categorise the highly able, the reason being that there exists no general consensus on how to define and explain what talent or giftedness are or, indeed, how they should be used to benefit society (e.g., Dries, 2013). The many labels applied by which to identify these extraordinary individuals vary considerably with culture, academic creed, ideology, and no less important, also on which societal stakeholder has a vested interest in them (O’Boyle & Aguinis, 2012; Persson, 2014). Whichever label is used, they all represent extraordinary skills and abilities, be they physical, cognitive, emotional, creative, practical or any combination of these. To understand high ability and its value to society, and therefore also its social status, it is imperative to know that different abilities are differently valued by different countries and cultures. By necessity, high ability is a *differentiated* notion. Some skills and abilities are perceived as uncontroversial, welcomed and encouraged by mainstream society, but others are tolerated at best, perhaps frowned upon, unwanted or, in some social contexts, even regarded as an existential threat. History is replete with fair-minded and well-intending dissidents who paid dearly for exposing injustices and publicly pointing to the corruption of governments and their leadership (see Szulecki, 2019). This was observed by American psychologist Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1942) already in the 1940s. She concluded that (p. 259):

a lesson which many gifted persons never learn as long as they live is that human beings in general are inherently very different from themselves in thought, in action, in general intention, and in interests. Many a reformer has died at the hands of a mob, which he was trying to improve in the belief that other human beings can and should enjoy what he enjoys. This is one of the most painful and difficult lessons that each gifted child must learn, if personal development is to proceed successfully.

It is surprising that such an important observation has had so little impact on giftedness and talent scholarship in general. It is far more common to embrace the highly able as heroes of an envisioned future, destined to save a World in dire straits (e.g., Shavinina, 2009; Sternberg, 2017). The fact that ‘smart people hurt’, to use Maisel’s (2013) phrase, has been systematically ignored by most scholars and practitioners in the field.

Countries and their cultures are characterised by *ability climates*; that is, there is a population-level pattern defining how knowledge and abilities tend to be valued (Persson, 2011). Intellectual academic pursuits in Sweden and Norway, for example, are not perceived as particularly valuable or worth striving for by most citizens, but athletic and musical pursuits certainly are. In the German-speaking world all pursuits tend to be considered more or less equally valued, whereas intellectual quests and careers are construed as more worthwhile than other types of interests in several Eastern European nations.

Extreme skills and abilities, therefore, have—or are given—a social *function* by society, which has a potential impact on social cohesion and societal structure. Skills and abilities can be used or abused, and the highly able can be ignored, harassed or even punished, depending on their function in any given cultural context. Note, that the negative impact of individual extreme deviation from mainstream behaviour is by no means unique to the human species (e.g., Nishida, Hosaka, Nakamura, & Hamai, 1995; Shultziner, Stevens, Stewart *et al.*, 2010). This raises the interesting question: which pattern describes acceptable or unacceptable behaviour in terms of social function and its biologically programmed aim to generate togetherness?

Social function can be divided into at least three primary domains: *Maintenance*, *Entertainment* and *Change*, which all relate to how individual high ability can impact a social context in relation to social cohesion (Table 1). Such a function is not planned or strategically and purposely implemented. It is initially not even known to society or, indeed, to the highly able individuals themselves. Social Function is brought about by evolutionary dynamics in a population. It is

genetically driven in response to the social environment, with an aim to adapt for greater chances of group and species survival (cf. Sumpter, 2010).

A maintenance function signifies permanence; that is, no or little change—or controlled change in an intended direction—aiming at strengthening and confirming what already is by whatever means are available.

An entertainment function, on the other hand, often has a compensatory function for the individuals seeking diversion. When a situation is unpleasant for whatever reason, we seek to cope by maintaining as positive an outlook on life as we possibly can. We turn to positive experiences offering a reprieve from a harsher external reality. We listen to music, read an engaging novel, watch a good film or engage in sports, either as an athlete or as a spectator not only out of interest, but also because it can provide a temporary alternative reality.

The function of change, finally, is the function that can potentially impact society the most and is therefore the function that is the most critical to social equilibrium. All knowledge and understanding are not always acceptable to society, to its leadership and not even to universities, for example when they yield academic freedom to political correctness, no matter how objectively true research results. This has been systematically demonstrated, for example, by Scholars at Risk (2019). Change in terms of strengthening and confirming group identity and societal structure is welcomed by most, but change that potentially weakens existing societal structures, leadership and group identity tends to present a threat.

Note that an individual may have several social functions. An author or an actor, for example, may well be admired by most and their skills much sought after as well as exorbitantly rewarded, but once they decide to take a public stand on something that has political significance, and put their charismatic appeal to the population behind it, they become agents of change. If their public views are contrary to political leadership, and they gain support by the population, they threaten an entire power structure. It matters little whether the political system is democratic, authoritarian or a combination of the two. Tolerance is mediated by the “ability climate”; that is, how different types of knowledge and skill are valued by the political system and its cultural values mediated and fostered by educational systems.

For these reasons, it is impossible to generalise the prospects of gifted and talented individuals in society in relation to social inclusion. Inclusion will always relate to the prevailing social function of an ability and its perceived value. While it is easy to include individuals admired by a majority of people who look up to them as heroes or role models, it is difficult, if not impossible, to fully include the intellectually extreme into any mainstream society.

It is telling that Simonton (1994) discovered that there is an optimal intelligence level for any leader to be successful; that is, an abstract thinking level of approximately IQ 119. If less intelligent than this, leaders risk not comprehending the complexities of society, and if higher a majority of people will not be able to understand or relate to them. Hence, they have no future in a democracy where they have to rely on a popular vote to be elected. Simonton elegantly demonstrated that the higher their intelligence the fewer their followers, and therefore also the less successful they were. The same holds true also for adults in working life. The intellectually gifted may objectively represent astounding assets to whoever employs them, but few employees understand their behaviour. For this reason, these extraordinary individuals tend to fare badly in organisations unaware of their uniqueness, ignorant of their motivation and perhaps even uninterested in how they tend to communicate (Lachner, 2012; Nauta & Ronner, 2008; Persson, 2009b). Being unable to communicate and to identify with someone you meet or work with, at least on some level, will automatically trigger suspicion, which in turn is detrimental to social cohesion (e.g., Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989).

There are those in any population, of course, who will not readily accept the mainstream culture in which they exist; or vice versa, individuals who will not readily be embraced by society around them but nevertheless remain tolerated. Such individuals sometimes create a subculture

together with other likeminded to satisfy their need for collective identity and togetherness, but on a much smaller scale in comparison to the surrounding main culture (cf. Cohen, 2005). In this understanding, high-IQ societies constitute subcultures, of which Mensa is likely to be the most internationally well-known.

Table 1: A taxonomy of gifted or talented behaviour, their social function and the common response of mainstream society to this behaviour (adapted from Persson, 2009a).

Primary social function	Skills, abilities and knowledge domains (Examples)	A probable universal social response
Maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medicine • Technology • Practical skills • Problem-solving and creativity within social acceptance 	Acceptance and encouragement (Supports social cohesion)
Entertainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Music • Theatre and drama • Literature • Art • Sports 	Acceptance and encouragement (Supports social cohesion)
Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intellectual skills • Understanding causality • Acting on perceived injustice • Problem-solving and creativity beyond social acceptance 	Resistance and challenge (Has the potential to threaten social cohesion)

Hence, deviation from similarity is viewed as positive *only* if it strengthens collective identity, does not threaten social structures or leadership and always reinforces a feeling of togetherness. This dynamic is true both of mainstream cultures and the subcultures within them.

The engineering of social inclusion

To live in a society where there is room for everyone, no matter where they come from, what they look like, which identity they prefer, which their lifestyle is or, indeed, their type and level of skill and ability, is a given objective for any democracy proper (e.g., Canal, 2010). This is a difficult objective to achieve in full, since it clearly flies in the face of evolutionary social dynamics dictating that *similarity* is inevitably the socially cohesive cornerstone of every social group. There is, however, a paradox here. While diversity has proven to boost national economies (Ottaviano & Peri, 2006; Trax, Brunow & Suedekum, 2015), diversity also tends to erode trust within any given social context (Stolle, Soroka & Johnston, 2008). It is easier for us to accept generalised trust in an entire diverse society (Hooghe, Reeskens, Stolle & Trappers, 2009), than it is in a smaller community or in a local neighbourhood (Gijsberts, van der Meer, & Dagevos, 2012). Nevertheless, there are clearly many diverse societies and communities in the world, and diversity seems to be less of a problem in some rather than in others. While there are a number of universal values forged by our genetic heritage and shared by all known cultures in recorded history (Brown, 1991), we are as humans, also able to assimilate values by learning them. A diverse society is strategically engineered by legislated policy and, importantly, by learning social norms from an early age (cf., Knight, 2001). This is not a perfect system. It frequently breaks down since we cannot change our most fundamental and biologically motivated human nature (Persson, 2016). We can ameliorate its impact at best. The same holds true of intellectually extreme individuals in any society. Legislating policy and educating the population about intellectual giftedness represents the only feasible effort by which to make this extraordinary group of individuals more acceptable, or at least more tolerated, in mainstream society, irrespective of culture. As discussed above, skills and abilities which function socially as maintenance and entertainment do not have this problem. Mainstream society’s intolerance is unique to highly intelligent individuals. As British psychologist Joan Freeman (2005) has so succinctly has phrased it: They need permission to be gifted; permission by their social context. However, it goes both ways.

There is not only a need for policy and general information, the exceedingly bright ones also need to be educated themselves. They need to understand who they are and why the world around them may sometimes react aversively as they demonstrate their prowess openly. They need to understand their place and function in the light of social evolutionary dynamics. They do not generally fit into the social fabric, as Persson (2007) observed (p. 31):

not because they lack empathy, social skills per se, societal concern and interest, or that they are in anyway psychiatrically morbid, but their social context finds it difficult to accept them because they find no way of relating to them. The gifted individual's reaction to this is not infrequently one of isolation and alienation. While there is no way for the world around them to ascend to their level of abstract thinking or fully understand their sensibility, the extremely gifted individual has no choice but to learn how to interact with others outside his or her range of communication. This is likely to be the greatest challenge of their life. They will have to approach the ones who for many years perhaps, have shunned them, ridiculed them, ignored them and so on, accept their slower ways and more limited understanding. And this, they have to do largely alone.

It is worth noting that while mainstream society and its formal institutions are to varying degrees reluctant to embrace the intellectually gifted and accept their frequently brilliant insights, the same is no longer true of an increasing number of businesses. These have understood that employees with extreme talent need to be managed differently than other employees, and the effort of doing this pays off greatly for everyone involved. With the emergence of Information Technology it has become increasingly common to build the organisation around the intellectually and creatively gifted, rather than trying to fit them into a predetermined formal structure, which has been the traditional norm for some time (Lachner, 2012; Schmidt & Rosenberg, 2014). Paradoxically, the formal structures of society, including education at all levels, do the opposite. They increase control and formal standards in the belief that this will also increase quality and productivity, much to the detriment of work force mental health, and particularly so to their employed extremely intelligent and creative.

Conclusion

The inclusion of intellectually extreme individuals into mainstream society, therefore, is anything but an easy objective, but even if this is difficult and largely contrary to social evolution, we can influence general views and attitudes to increase acceptance or, at the very least, to make tolerance possible. In order to bring this about it is first necessary to establish legislated policies, as well as to educate the general population in these matters. However, the intellectually gifted must be educated as well, and not only to increase their skills and abilities where their interests lie, but *also* provide them with an understanding of themselves and their inevitable impact on social dynamics in whatever social context they exist. To promise them a guaranteed future as heroes and world problem-solvers, as so much of current gifted education literature does, is a considerable problem. These individuals most certainly are extraordinary but their future, like everyone else's, is never guaranteed, and it is unlikely that they will be allowed to become the public heroes of the future.

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