
Needed: Knowledge About Gifted Adults

by Noks Nauta, MSPE

Introduction

Since the year 2000, I have been fascinated by learning more about giftedness in adults. I spend a great deal of my time working on this topic, mainly voluntarily, for a foundation I co-founded in The Netherlands. I present, write about, and initiate research projects on this topic, and I want to share this information with my fellow Thousanders. I will begin with my personal experiences with adult giftedness; and then I will present a literature overview of the topic of gifted adults to illustrate the need for more information.

My Life

I was born in Amsterdam in 1947. It was a time when girls (especially in the cities) were viewed as more equal to boys than ever before. I was a lively girl and was curious about many subjects. I was an early reader, which helped me to cope with boredom. School was great for me; I had friends, and I completed schoolwork well. I seized all opportunities to learn extra subjects, especially in secondary school, where I took Russian and Spanish. I got good marks and never skipped a grade; there was no reason to skip.

I studied medicine at university, which was a bit of a disappointment, as there were no real discussions about the topics we were to learn. However, there were many possibilities to do other things. I explored philosophy, I picked up singing, I played tennis, and I had a lot of friends.

When I started working, that was a bit of a disappointment, too. So, I took up many other responsibilities at the same time. I got married, had children, got divorced, and was always busy. My later jobs were more interesting. I specialized in occupational health, and I had good bosses who trusted me and let me do things my way. I had to face challenging situations, such as how



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to deal with hepatitis B and AIDS in healthcare environments and in prisons. I was even the Dutch representative at a 1988 WHO conference which focused on that very situation. I later started at Open University, studying psychology, and attained my degree in 1999.

When I was 52, I had a conflict at work. I was in a new job, and my boss was very bossy. She micromanaged everything and constantly looked over my shoulder, telling me what to do. Unfortunately, her functioning ability was very poor—an observation with which many of my coworkers agreed. I left and took a new job, where it almost happened again.

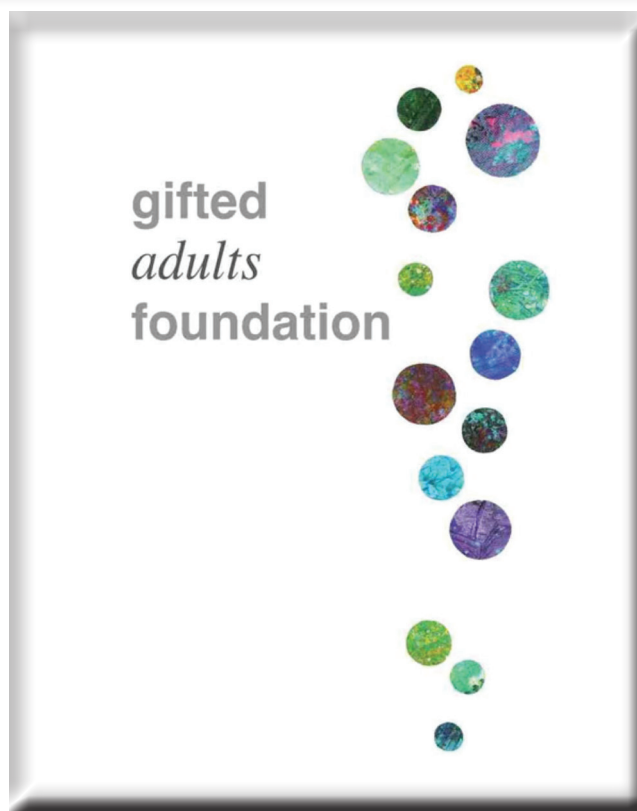
Then, a friend—who was a Mensa member—suggested that perhaps I was gifted. I did not believe that. My image of giftedness was much different from the perception I had of myself. But, out of curiosity, I took an IQ test and scored the maximum. The psychologist said I was the first one she had seen in her practice with such

a score. I was astonished; the test was so easy. Then, I became a member of Mensa in The Netherlands, where I met many people with similar work-related problems. Even in my background of professional health, I had never encountered the topic of giftedness at work. So, I started—hardly realizing what that would entail—to do my own research. And I found that the term “gifted” in the published literature seemed to refer only to children—almost 100% of the time!

Literature on gifted adults was very scarce. At that time, I was able to find only two American books on the topic: Mary-Elaine Jacobsen’s *The Gifted Adult* (2000),¹ and Marylou Streznewski’s *Gifted Grownups: The Mixed Blessings of Extraordinary Potential* (1999).² But those books triggered me to ask more questions. I queried many Mensa members about adult giftedness, but they gave me the same information I already had. Where could I turn for more information?

My life went on, and I continued working and gaining more self-knowledge—knowledge that I still continue to gather. I wrote my first book in 2007, *Gifted Workers*.³ With a small group of pioneers, I continued to explore and discuss adult giftedness. In 2010, in The Netherlands, I (alongside Maud van Thiel) co-founded *Instituut Hoogbegaafdheid Volwassenen* (IHBV, a.k.a. the “Gifted Adults Foundation,” in English), a knowledge institute which aims to make the world a better place for gifted adults and seniors.⁴ Through my work with the Gifted Adults Foundation, I have published articles and books; and I have given presentations in The Netherlands and other European countries, in addition to several presentations in the USA at conferences hosted by SENG (Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted).⁵

I have done a lot of networking (not commercially) to gain knowledge and connections regarding adult giftedness. Some universities in The Netherlands are interested in the topic and have had students perform studies



Logo of the Gifted Adults Foundation.

on adult giftedness. One study has even been done by a university teacher. Unfortunately, not all of these studies were performed with good research quality, and not all of them have been published in English.

In 2011, I became a member of the Triple Nine Society (TNS) after having read something about it and becoming very curious. My test result from my test in 2000 was sufficient for entry in TNS. Then, after communicating with long-time ISPE member Vernon Neppe in Seattle in 2017, I became an ISPE member, too. More and more, I got the impression that *highly* gifted people may be more outspoken than gifted people in general. (When taking only IQ into account, I consider “gifted” to be two standard deviations higher than average—IQ+2SD—and “highly gifted” to be three or more standard deviations higher—IQ+3SD or IQ+4SD, etc.) However, literature on the differences in characteristics between *gifted* and *highly gifted* individuals is extremely scarce, especially regarding adults. So, this is still an

ongoing research topic for me, and I do wish money were available to fund a proper study.

Knowledge on Gifted Adults

More than 20 years have passed since I made my own discovery of adult giftedness and began researching the topic. It is interesting to review the history of what I found in my investigations and what is currently happening in the field of adult giftedness. When I started reading about gifted adults, I found that real studies had not been performed. Jacobsen (2000) and Streznewski (1999) had written down observations and combined them with their own thoughts, hypotheses, and conclusions.⁶ That was a very good start. I built upon that and combined my observations with my professional knowledge.

My own interest in this field started with investigating the interactions—especially the conflicts—that gifted people experience at work. For many years, I collaborated with Ido van der Waal, who is a workplace mediator. In our studies on workplace conflicts involving the gifted, we identified specific patterns (Van der Waal et al., 2013).⁷ We also discovered that these conflict patterns begin at a young age. Therefore, it is very important that parents and teachers know how to recognize these patterns in order to help gifted children learn from these situations. However, conflict itself is not the problem; it is the outcome which is often very harmful, in many respects. We now believe that recognizing situations in which conflict escalation is imminent—and knowing the proper way to respond—will effectively help in many situations in life! To share our research findings, Ido and I have two book manuscripts ready, both of which are in English. One is about gifted children, and the other is about gifted adults. We hope we can publish them later this year.

Maud van Thiel, the other co-founder of IHBV, has performed a Delphi study on gifted adults. An article about this research model has been

published in English.⁸ This model reveals many aspects and characteristics of the gifted person. In summary, using the Delphi method, the study identified specific keywords to describe six characteristics of giftedness (three in relation to the self and three in relation to the outside world); regarding “interplay,” four keywords were identified:

Characteristics	Keywords
being	autonomous
thinking	highly intelligent
feeling	multifaceted
wanting	curious and passionate
perceiving	highly sensitive
doing	creation-directed
interplay	quickness, creativity, complexity, intensity ⁹

When this model was published in The Netherlands, we received many very positive reactions. It was as if publication of the model allowed the concept of giftedness in adults to finally exist, as it validated the idea that giftedness does not disappear after childhood. When I give presentations on this model, the model always provides a lot of insight into not only the characteristics of adult giftedness but also the connection—or disconnection—between the characteristics. When attending the presentation, some gifted people can become quite emotional; they immediately recognize the way in which their lives have gone so far. Some have expressed, “I decided long ago not to ‘feel’ anymore. That was too painful.” But that “turning off” of their emotions created many barriers in their lives, later on.

The gifted people who told me that they had sought professional help, via mental-health care, said that their specific problems were often not

addressed—problems that resulted from living the life of a gifted person who never felt that they really belonged, even in the groups they interacted with. I, myself, did not have many bad experiences in this regard, but I could still understand these people much better than many mental-health professionals (and I have never worked in mental-health care). So, I found that I could serve as a kind of interpreter between gifted adults and mental-health providers, and I began to write and present for health-care professionals. Last year, a group of gifted mental-health care professionals created a nationwide network, so I am now able to let my work continue to be carried on by them.

In 2004, I started to author a book on gifted adults in the workplace, and I collaborated with a psychologist who specialized in coaching. The book was published in Dutch in 2007 and was very well received. It was the first Dutch book on gifted adults. It is still being sold and helps with recognizing giftedness in the workplace. Through a lot of work (and money), I was able to have it translated into English; and in 2016, *Gifted Workers: Hitting the Target* was completed.¹⁰

Other researchers have since then begun to perform studies on gifted adults. One recent study was published by Patricia van Casteren, who performed qualitative research about wellbeing in the workplace.¹¹

Additional books on gifted adults have also been published, such as Fiedler's *Bright Adults: Uniqueness and Belonging Across the Lifespan*¹² in the USA and Falck's *Extreme Intelligence: Development, Predicaments, Implications* in England.¹³ In addition, two of my Dutch colleagues have had their books translated into English; those books are Frans Corten's *Exceptional Talent: A Guide for the Gifted, the Inventors and Other Birds of a Rare Feather*¹⁴ and Willem Kuipers' *Enjoying the Gift of Being Uncommon*.¹⁵

More and more books and articles on adult giftedness are now being published in various languages. I must say that I haven't read them all, as I tend to not find any new information in many of these books.

Research Challenges

Studies on gifted and highly gifted people all suffer from the same methodological issue: finding a group of these people representative of the *whole* group is impossible. The results of studies among Mensa members, for instance, can only be extrapolated to apply to other Mensa members. We don't know the factors that influenced each individual person to become a member of a high-IQ society. There are many more gifted people who are not members of high-IQ societies and who, thus, have very different experiences. So, studying only members of Mensa, TNS, or ISPE leads to bias in research.

Another difficult research issue involves the very definition of giftedness. Intelligence is, of course, a parameter; but giftedness is a wider concept. Maggie Brown performed a Delphi study to create an international consensus on giftedness in adults. She has already published her first article.¹⁶

It is still very interesting to find out whether our insights about *gifted* adults also apply to *highly gifted* adults (such as ISPE members). It sounds logical that the disconnect that is often experienced by a gifted person (IQ +2SD) when interacting with a person of average IQ is also felt when a highly gifted person (+3 or +4 SD) interacts with a gifted person. But we have no proper studies to support this idea; we have only our experiences. The research I have read about this idea is all based on children, such as Gross's work in 2004¹⁷ and Hollingworth's work in 2015.¹⁸ In 1987, Grady Towers wrote about this phenomenon, but his observations were from within the group.¹⁹ They are very interesting observations to read, but they are not based on an official study. In the academic world, such

articles are not accepted, as the methodology is not clear and replication cannot be done.

In the USA, studies have been done in groups with a very high SAT score. Although there is, of course, a strong statistical correlation between SAT score and intelligence, SAT is not identical to intelligence. The SAT test is often taken during the upper high school years—a time by which some highly gifted children may have already dropped out of school. In addition, it is quite possible that some gifted students by that time simply no longer perform well on tests, because of years of school-related and other unaddressed life frustrations. I do not suggest this phenomenon exists in a large number of cases, only that we simply do not know.

I have several ideas regarding methods to continue to move research forward regarding

highly gifted people, and two books that I have coauthored with Ido van der Waal will, hopefully, be published in 2021. One of those books deals with conflicts experienced by gifted children, and the other book addresses conflicts of gifted adults. In addition to my works listed in the NOTES section of this article, you can find more of my publications on ResearchGate.

The biggest challenge we are currently facing in the study of highly gifted adults is the shortage of high-caliber researchers who are willing to assist with this challenge.

Are there any researchers in ISPE who would like to share their ideas about gifted-adult research within 3SD high-IQ societies? Let me know!

You can contact me at
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NOTES

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5. Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted, <https://www.sengifted.org/>.
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7. Ido van der Waal, Noks Nauta, and Rebecca Lindhout, “Labour Disputes of Gifted Employees,” *Gifted and Talented International* 28, no. 1&2 (August and December 2013): 163-172, <https://ihbv.nl/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Of-course-Im-right-IHBV-Poster-Occupational-Physicians-2013-1.pdf>.
8. Maud van Thiel, Noks Nauta, and Jan Derksen, “An Experiential Model of Giftedness: Giftedness from an Internal Point of View, Made Explicit by Means of the Delphi Method,” *Advanced Development Journal* 17 (2019): 79-99.
9. Ibid; Maud Kooijman-van Thiel, ed., *Hoogbegaafd. Dat zie je zó! Over zelfbeeld en imago van hoogbegaafden* (Ede, The Netherlands: OYA Productions, 2008). This book was published in Dutch; the title translates to *Gifted, Obviously! On Identity and Self-Image of Gifted Persons*.

10. Nauta and Ronner.

11. Patricia A. J. van Casteren, Jan Meerman, Evelien P. M. Brouwers, Arno van Dam, and Jac. J. L. van der Klink, “How Can Wellbeing at Work and Sustainable Employability of Gifted Workers Be Enhanced? A Qualitative Study from a Capability Approach Perspective,” *BMC Public Health* 21, no. 392 (2021), <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/track/pdf/10.1186/s12889-021-10413-8.pdf>.

12. Ellen Fiedler, *Bright Adults: Uniqueness and Belonging Across the Lifespan* (Tucson, AZ: Great Potential Press, Inc., 2015).

13. Sonja Falck, *Extreme Intelligence: Development, Predicaments, Implications* (Abingdon-on-Thames, England: Routledge, 2019).

14. Frans Corten, *Exceptional Talent: A Guide for the Gifted, the Inventors and Other Birds of a Rare Feather* (Vorden, The Netherlands: 2021), <https://uitzonderlijktalent.nl/en/>.

15. Willem Kuipers, *Enjoying the Gift of Being Uncommon* (CreateSpace, 2011).

16. Maggie Brown, Elizabeth R. Peterson, and Catherine Rawlinson, “Research with Gifted Adults: What International Experts Think Needs to Happen to Move the Field Forward,” *Roeper Review* 42, no. 2 (April 2020): 95-108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2020.1728797>.

17. Miraca U. M. Gross, *Exceptionally Gifted Children* 2nd ed. (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2004).

18. Leta S. Hollingworth, *Children Above 180 IQ Stanford-Binet: Origin and Development* (CreateSpace, 2015). This is a reprint from 1975, which was a reprint from the 1926 book *Gifted Children, Their Nature and Nurture*.

19. Grady M. Towers, “The Outsiders,” *Gift of Fire* 22 (April 1987), <http://www.worlddreambank.org/O/OUTSIDRS.HTM>. 

“I’ve always felt that a person’s intelligence is directly reflected by the number of conflicting points of view he can entertain simultaneously on the same topic.”

—Abigail Adams