

**THE MEANING AND EXPERIENCE OF GIFTEDNESS AT WORK:**

**A HEURISTIC INQUIRY**

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PREVIEW

## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand the meaning and experience of adult giftedness in the workplace. This study is a heuristic inquiry and, by nature, seeks to discover all the relevant components to this meaning and experience of giftedness, and, thus is open to the essence of the experience as it unfolds. Data collection for this inquiry was conducted at the individual/whole person level. The research relied heavily on the use of interviews, which included guiding questions, but allowed for each co-researcher to express the meaning and experience of giftedness in the workplace in their own words. This permitted the inclusion of any other unforeseen data sources that could have arose during the inquiry. The results of the inquiry reveal that the meaning and essence of the experience of giftedness in the workplace begins with the experience of multipotentiality and the intrinsic and undeniable drive to explore ones abilities and pursue the task of work in a passionate way. However, this passion and drive to produce, to utilize talents to their fullest, tends to highlight the gifted adults differences from his average workplace peers. **The experience of giftedness in the workplace is at its core, a frustrating experience.** Frustrations exist, though tempered with a realization that differences exists between the gifted adult, his/her motivations, preferences, abilities and drives and the non-gifted co-workers. By developing a richer understanding of the essence of giftedness, those in professional positions to assist in the facilitation of gifted development will be better able to do so. New understanding may allow psychologists to be more capable of answering the questions related to how the gifted and talented experience life. Implications for employers are discussed.

## **Dedication**

To my parents, David and Kim, for their lifelong support, even when I wasn't "applying" myself.

To my son, Bobby, for being tolerant when mommy had to 'work on her paper' in the final weeks of this endeavor.

To Jim, you may not have been in my life when I started this, but you certainly cheered me on in finishing it.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

The purpose of this study is to discover detailed insight into the meaning of being a gifted adult in the workplace, building on the interesting but limited body of research to date on the experience of giftedness and life outcomes. The 1972 Marland Report stated that “Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who, by virtue of outstanding abilities, are capable of high performance; these are children who require differential educational programs and/or services beyond those provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and the society” (McClellan, 1985; p. 2). Given this definition, it is often assumed that gifted adults achieve life outcomes relative to their giftedness when compared to their non-gifted peers. However, overall, individuals who have been identified as gifted during school do not go on to have career/life outcomes as high as would be expected (Greene, 2006). Several researchers have identified a link between educational attainment, especially for men, and occupational outcomes (Tomlinson-Keasy & Little, 1990; Schuster, 1990; Scullin, Peters, Williams & Ceci, 2000; Greene, 2006). However, as McClellan (1985) pointed out, giftedness is typically viewed as synonymous with high intellectual ability and the academic focus is usually in response to the current needs of society at that time. Thus, many gifted individuals go unidentified or their needs go unfulfilled because they are not synchronous with society’s needs at the time. Therefore, as gifted individuals enter into the workplace, many are, in essence, underachieving and this is likely to result in diminished performance in the organizations for which they work.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The current state of inquiry into a full, rich, deep, and generally accepted understanding of giftedness is lacking and, thus, seems to be prime for research into the meaning and experience of the phenomenon of 'giftedness' as it exists in relation to the world of work. Shavinina (2007) theorized that the expression of giftedness is a phenomenon qualitatively distinct from expertise in a field, but there is a lack of research to confirm or deny this theory. Pfeiffer (2001) echoed the notion that there is a lack of theory to inform practices that enhance the opportunities for giftedness to develop in childhood and its continued expression over the lifespan. The lack of theory and insight into the meaning and experience of giftedness and the influence of this experience in the world of work is preventing planned interventions that support existing drive and serve to motivate the continued use of gifts in adulthood. The issue is not limited to academic performance, but spills over into areas of the social sciences that promote individual expression and enjoyment and into the more utilitarian domains related to solving the wicked problems of industry, politics and society.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand the meaning and experience of adult giftedness in the workplace. By developing a richer understanding of the essence of giftedness, those in positions to assist in the facilitation of gifted development will be poised to do so in a scientifically validated manner. New understanding may allow psychologists to be more capable of answering the questions related to how the gifted and talented experience life, what the impacts of giftedness are on the individual's career and life outcomes, and how best to support their development in the workplace.

## **Significance of the Study**

The significance of the problem, and thus this study, is twofold. First are the implications for mitigating problems related to closing the ability-performance gap. Industrial-Organizational Psychology practitioners are expected to work with and be expert consultants to industry and individuals to manage talent and enhance performance. The lack of understanding of how to bring out the strengths of those who are gifted is contributing to the field's inability to fully use the collective intelligence and resources available to solve difficult workplace problems. Secondly, research indicates that gifted children experience unmet social, emotional, and psychoeducational needs (Pfeiffer, 2001). Thus, the gifted adult may also experience the same unmet needs. The field of psychology, and Industrial-Organizational Psychology in its own right, has the unique opportunity to contribute to industry's fuller understanding of these needs and the related implications for interventions that promote wellness and enhanced workplace performance (Pfeiffer, 2001).

## **Research Design**

Douglass and Moustakas (1985) note in their discussion of the contrasts between traditional empirical study design and heuristic inquiry, that the empirical study presupposes a cause and effect relationship while in contrast, the heuristic inquiry does not make such a presumption, but instead seeks to discover the nature and meaning of a phenomenon through the use of first-person accounts of experience with/of the phenomenon. They further delineate between heuristic inquiry (sometimes referred to as heuristic phenomenology, which is somewhat misleading) and phenomenology, clarifying that heuristics emphasizes a relationship and connectedness to the phenomenon under investigation, whereas phenomenology almost encourages a disconnection from the phenomenon and risks (and often results in) a loss of the

person through the process of descriptive analysis. Heuristics does not run this risk because it requires a reintegration of previous tacit understanding and perception of the self in the world with new knowledge and understanding into the essence of the experience of the phenomenon. Heuristics, thus, focuses on, according to Moustakas (1990), the full and complete phenomenological experience from the reference point of the experiencing person.

This study will utilize a heuristic research design based on Moustakas' approach. In accordance with the heuristic tradition, participants will be referred to and viewed as co-researchers in the inquiry. The co-researchers will be adults who were identified at some time during their compulsory education as gifted and who are motivated to participate in this inquiry.

Moustakas' heuristic model will provide the structure for the inquiry and its pursuit of the meaning of the experience under inquiry. Polanyi (1974) describes the power and resulting contribution when utilizing a heuristic approach to inquiry: "Heuristic passion is...the mainspring of originality – the force which impels us to abandon an accepted framework of interpretation and commit ourselves, by the crossing of a logical gap, to the use of a new framework" (p.159). Polanyi (1974) also notes that the meaning of any individual part of a whole can only be truly uncovered and understood in relation to the context within which it exists. So, to attempt to divorce or separate the meaning of the experience of a phenomenon from the person experiencing it, renders the pursuit of the existential meaning merely representative and not at all pure.

Moustakas' model allows for the natural flow of inquiry necessary for discovery of all of the relevant components that may not be initially consciously or otherwise known to the researcher (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). There are three main phases of the heuristic inquiry process: Immersion, Acquisition, and Realization, which Moustakas further elucidates in his

1990 book “*Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications.*” In this book he discusses six phases which are not linear in their engagement as the three Phases describes by Douglass and Moustakas (1985), but cyclical as related to each data source. These six, what he also calls, Phases, include Initial Engagement, Immersion, Incubation, Illumination, Explication, and Creative Synthesis. It is during the process of cycling through the six phases that the researcher discovers the research question (Initial Engagement), becomes one with the question and his/her own experiences and then with each of the co-research’s individual experiences and essential meaning of the phenomenon through an ebb and flow between concentrated and lingering attention to the data (Immersion and Incubation), until such a time that themes that represent the meaning and essence of the experience begin to present themselves to the researcher (Illumination), upon which time the researcher uses self-search and indwelling to discover the new meaning (Explication) and documents this via a synthesized composite of the experience as well as a presentation of two or three individual co-researcher portraits that represent the core elements of the lived meaning (Moustakas, 1990).

This study is concerned with adult gifted individuals’ experience of giftedness in the workplace. Data collection will be conducted at the individual/whole person level and rely heavily on the use of interviews and will welcome the inclusion of any other unforeseen data sources that may arise during the inquiry, which is consistent with a heuristic design (Patton, 2002).

### **Research Question and Hypotheses**

What is the meaning and experience of giftedness at work? In order to allow the answer to this question to fully emerge and make itself known, a heuristic approach was chosen. Heuristic inquiry seeks to bring to light the dimensions of the lived experience of giftedness at

work as each co-researcher divulges it. Thus, by the very nature of the research question and the research design, there are no hypotheses, but instead a requirement of the shared experience of being a gifted individual who exists in the context in a workplace.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

This study is concerned with the meaning and essence of giftedness at work. While Creswell (2006) indicated that researchers can refrain from utilizing a particular theoretical framework when conducting phenomenological inquiry, this researcher believes that part of understanding the essence of a phenomenon inherently assumes an existential nature to the meaning of the phenomenon.

There is a liberation that comes with approaching such an inquiry from an existential framework since Existentialism asserts that all meaning is constructed at the intersection where one understands himself and how he relates to his existence in the world (Langle, 2004). Coming to this realization is an important step in process of living authentically. This researcher believes that coming to a true understanding of the meaning of giftedness (via an uncovering of the true essence of the experience) at the intersection of the gifted individual and existence in the world of work is necessary for the gifted adult to live authentically as a gifted individual. Thus, this researcher fully acknowledges and embraces the existential theoretical foundation from which one cannot escape in the pursuance of this inquiry.

Qualitative researchers typically share an assumption regarding the validity of the subjective experience in scientific inquiry. This assumption is that the subjective experiencing of a phenomenon and the documentation of this experience according to a rigorous methodology adds valuable information to the professional literature. Secondly, this study assumes that there

is something qualitatively different about how gifted individuals experience themselves in life and, thus, in the context of work.

It is assumed that giftedness makes up one aspect of identity that is worth studying in order to provide a research foundation for the development of work-design strategies that meet the needs of gifted adults in the workplace. Freeman's (2006) study on the influence of being identified as gifted indicated that early career convergence and multipotentiality are but two challenges relevant to this inquiry. The process of identity development includes aspects of career choice. Frank and McBee (2003) discuss how successfully meeting the challenges of the identity development process can influence adult success and well-being. Therefore, this inquiry is assuming that there is merit in uncovering the lived meaning of giftedness and will build on the work of Freeman (2006) and Frank and McBee (2003), which indicates there is an experience of giftedness that indirectly influences how the gifted individual views themselves in the workplace, as well as how they approach or do not approach the fulfillment of potential over their lifespan, and overall well-being.

The primary limitation of this study is that this study is pioneering research in this area, as there is no study to pattern or inform this current heuristic inquiry. There is no way to change that reality. However, taking precautions, such as placing a critical eye on the evaluation of the analysis of the data, will assist in ensuring that the groundbreaking nature of this inquiry lays a solid foundation for future research efforts. While this researcher has had experience with using a general qualitative design and the associated methodology, this study and its utilization of a heuristic methodology, represents a new research methodology for this researcher.

Some may believe that the lack of quantifiability is a limitation of qualitative research in general; this perception is incongruent with the purpose of qualitative inquiry. The limitation of

this study by design is not the lack of quantifiable results, but the lack of broad generalization associated with quantifiability. Despite the methodology's requirement to develop a portrait of the individual and his experience as it is representative of the shared lived experience, this portrait does not constitute generalizability. It cannot. In heuristics, it is understood almost a priori, that the investigator and each individual co-researcher cannot be separated from their individual personal experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). It is impossible to create a description that describes the intimate experience of the phenomenon that is universally applicable or that provides outsiders with a tool to accurately predict in others what the meaning and essence of the experience is.

### **Definitions of Terms**

The research question is 'What is the meaning and experience of giftedness at work?' Thus, the phenomena that are of interest in the study are gifted(ness) and experience. According to the National Association of Gifted Children, which publishes the scholarly reviewed journal *Gifted Child Quarterly*, gifted(ness) refers to individuals who gave evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership and who needed services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities at anytime during their compulsory education (National Association for Gifted Children, 2010). In addition to this definition, this study utilizes Sword's (2005) discussion of giftedness and the heightened emotional experience of the gifted. When these two perspectives are used together, this researcher defines giftedness as the possession of heightened intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership, and/or emotional experiences/empathetic abilities by individuals whose full development of these abilities would benefit from activities or services not ordinarily provided

by the school system or other institutions (colleges, universities, training programs, or employers).

Experience, or lived meaning or lived experiences, is “the way that a person experiences and understands his or her own life as real and meaningful. ‘Lived meaning’ describes those aspects of a situation as experienced by the person in it” (Van Manen, 2000; pp. 183). Thus, the experience of giftedness at work is being approached in an existential nature and in relation to the individual’s understanding of the meaning of giftedness within his work-life.

### **Researcher Expectations**

The expectations outlined in this section were based on this researcher’s own experience of giftedness in the workplace and were addressed in order to bracket this researcher’s own experience and bias. This researcher expected to find that co-researchers have had experiences in the workplace that are related to their giftedness. Specifically, this researcher expected that at least some co-researchers had the experience of feeling the need to choose workplace social inclusion over product-related performance. It was also anticipated that other co-researchers could disclose frustrations surrounding the speed with which co-workers solve problems, are motivated to change business practices or processes for improvement, and/or with co-worker appreciation of the co-researcher’s related abilities. Finally, it was expected that some co-researchers would express lack of engagement or on-the-job boredom as a result of the job’s complexity being below that which keeps the gifted employee interested and/or engaged in the work to be performed. While it is never known by the researcher ahead of time where the interview discussion will lead in a heuristic study, these expectations were based on the researcher’s own experience with giftedness in the workplace. Typically, such expectations would be viewed as a negative influence on the research process which would bias the results.

However, in heuristic inquiry, the researcher's own experiences are seen as the lens through which the experiences are focused because of the shared experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

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## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Given the high potential for performance that gifted individuals possess, the purpose of this study is to discover the meaning and essence of giftedness in the workplace. The review of literature will cover the current conceptualizations of giftedness, including what is understood about recognizing and developing giftedness, special issues related to giftedness, and the emerging theories of giftedness; as well as a review of the related literature that informed the inquiry's design.

### **Current Understanding of Giftedness**

#### **Giftedness as Cognitive Ability Expressed Through Expert Performance**

Sternberg and Horvath (2002) defined giftedness as expertise and assert that to attempt to understand the singular essence of giftedness is impossible because the true essence of giftedness is simply dependant on and defined by the area of expertise. This product-focused definition measures giftedness in terms of the quantity of the individual's knowledge in a particular field and the relative 'out-put' of the individual. If you know more and produce more, or have the ability to produce more as measured by some other means, such as an IQ test, than the average person in the field, then you are an expert, and, thus, gifted in that field. This type of equation of giftedness with high levels of knowledge and out-put highlights the key issue: the generally accepted practice of using intelligence scores, or test results of general mental ability, as the core means of identifying giftedness. While Sternberg's (2007) more recent work expands the definition of intelligence to include such things as creativity and analytical ability, many still view intelligence as a single-dimensional 'thing' that is linearly related to ability to perform academically.

This belief that giftedness is a single-dimensional, product-oriented phenomenon supports the field of education's focus and resources on developing the cognitive abilities of gifted children, despite the existing evidence that giftedness is indeed a multifaceted and processes-orientated phenomenon. For example, Pfeiffer's 2001 study that surveyed the 'experts' in the fields of gifted education, talent development, and psychology, concluded that these fields are still operating from a paradigm that is concerned with the educational needs of gifted children as the means to producing desired cognitive process outcomes. Even the National Association of Gifted Children's most recent definition of giftedness is related to visible performance vs. defining giftedness as being both performance and process.

Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports). (National Association for Gifted Children, 2010)

The impact of this narrow focus is a stifling of discussion on what talent development should entail for gifted individuals over the lifespan. The ripple effect can be seen in the impact of compulsory education practices that reach into the world of work. The current educational practices are concerned with facilitating the expression and use of gifts among the cognitively gifted, but the expression of these gifts subsides over the lifespan. Tomlinson-Keasy and Little (1990) highlight that the logico-mathematical and linguistic domains are those most valued in the American academic settings and, thus, receive the most support for development in the academic context and their study results indicate that intellectual potential identified in childhood does not automatically equate to relative life outcomes in adulthood. Instead, they assert that there is a long educational and socialization process that influences the adjustment and productivity in adulthood. Furthermore, the results indicated a couple of notable correlations.

First, there is a negative correlation between gifted children's sociability and adult intellectual skill maintenance. In other words, children involved in the study who were popular, in good health, possessed high levels of physical energy, and had a cheerful and optimistic attitude were less likely to maintain their intellectual skill as adults, whereas less popular children were more likely to maintain their intellectual interests in adulthood (Tomlinson-Keasy & Little, 1990). Second, while it was hypothesized that educational attainment, intellectual skill and personal adjustment would predict occupational achievement, only educational attainment and intellectual skill were significant predictors (Tomlinson-Keasy & Little, 1990). The authors cite the 40 year duration (and all of the confounding variables in life experiences) and the conservative statistical procedures used as a possible reason why personal adjustment was not a significant predictor. However, this study is now twenty-one years old, and provides a nice historical snap-shop. When these results are considered in light of Freeman's (2006) more recent theory that the gifted are often faced with having to make the choice between social and intellectual needs, it is not surprising that the children in the study who were notably more social did not maintain their intellectual interests in adulthood.

Shavinina (2007) offered a more recent and richer contextual discussion of giftedness and challenges the notion of giftedness is, essentially, expert performance within a domain. This phenomenon is also sometimes referred to as the 10-year rule of expertise and asserts that experts in any field have dedicated approximately 10-years of concentrated and deliberate practice to that field. Shavinina's (2007) challenge of the 10-year rule asserts that there is a set of conditions that must co-exist for giftedness to emerge. One of her key points is a necessity of the co-occurrence between the beginning point of deliberate practice towards fulfilling naturally high potential beyond mere expertise and, what she calls, developmentally sensitive periods. A

developmentally sensitive period is one in which the individual's mental development is accelerated by the actualization of his potential in a domain and the growth of the cognitive resources which produce a unique, subjective cognitive experience of the individual's conceptual structures and knowledge base within the domain (Shavinina, 2007). In other words, the experience of the Self and one's own performance within a domain of naturally high ability, produces the subjective experience of self-actualization within that domain and further facilitates the individual's motivation to develop the ability by pursuing opportunities to further knowledge and skills within the domain.

### **Giftedness as Qualitative Differences**

Despite the general lack of related literature 20 years ago, Jacobsen (1999) laid the foundation for the current understanding of the gifted individual's emotional experiences by describing and theorizing gifted children are "hot-receptors", or individuals whose sensory systems and intuition are finely tuned, thus allowing the gifted to note the slightest of changes in their external environments, to have a heightened ability to determine not only how things are but how they should be, and possessing the drive and desire to fix or perfect those things in their external environment that are out of balance or should be some other way. Thus Jacobsen (1999), as well as Daniels & Piechowski (2009), challenged the paradigm of giftedness being a matter of more intelligence, more ability, or more experience. Daniels & Piechowski (2009) also assert that giftedness is a matter of difference in the quality and texture of experience. They discuss that the gifted individual thinks differently, experiences emotions differently, and exhibits a set of personality traits that are distinctly different from the non-gifted individual. While these traits may be considered excessive by others, Jacobsen (1999) suggested viewing the

difference in energy, sensitivity and complexity, sometimes called ‘intensity’ or ‘excitabilities’, that mark the gifted individual, as assets.

According to Sword (2005), this intensity can include intensity of feeling, either positive, negative, or both; experiences with emotions that manifests as bodily symptoms such as tense stomach, sinking heart, blushing, headache, or nausea; inhibitions, timidity or, shyness; a strong affective memory; experiencing fears and anxieties, feelings of guilt, feelings of being out of control; concern with death, or a depressive mood; strong emotional ties and attachments to others, empathy and concern for others, a sensitivity in relationships, attachment to animals, difficulty in adjusting to new environments, loneliness, and potential conflicts with others over the depth of relationships; critical self-evaluation and self-judgment, feelings of inadequacy and inferiority.

Intensity is a hallmark trait of the gifted that is typically misunderstood or unappreciated (Jacobsen, 1999). While intensity has not been called pathology outright, it has been described as unstable instead of being viewed as congruent with the developmental differences and heightened abilities of the gifted that might also include a heightened emotional experience of the world (Sword, 2005). Sword (2005) posits that it should be seen as reasonable to view the gifteds’ heightened emotional abilities as being of similar relation to their intellect. If the gifted have high cognitive abilities, such as mathematical, creative, artistic, or leadership abilities, then why is it not plausible and even logical that they also have high emotional capabilities that differ from the general population (Sword, 2005)?

### **In the World of Work**

As we move through the lifespan development of a gifted individual from compulsory education to entering and functioning in the world of work, we begin to see the impact of the

currently utilized paradigm for understanding giftedness. While there may not be a typical gifted individual, there are certain common and predictable issues. The over-emphasis on academics, the expectations of others for achieving, and the phenomenon of underachievement all impact the adolescent gifted individual during the career-decision making process (Greene, 2006). Often, gifted and talented individuals are dismissed as being capable of handling these issues without help because their giftedness is perceived as being indicative of their ability to effectively meet with any and all challenges (Plucker & Levy, 2001). Shavinina (2004) discusses the phenomenon of giftedness through her study of Nobelaureats' experiences with their life and career paths. She asserts that Nobelaureats represent only a small number of gifted individuals out there who are known because of what they produce.

Greene (2006) discusses the internal experiences and challenges of gifted adolescents during the career-decision-making process. These challenges include multipotentiality, early career emergence and foreclosure, and personality traits, such as sensitivity, heightened sense of social responsibility, and perfectionism. Once in the world of work, gifted and talented individuals experience additional challenges, such as professional jealousy and envy by co-workers who feel threatened by their high abilities (Plucker & Levy, 2001) and the need to choose between the fulfillment of social needs and the fulfillment of intellectual needs, since fulfilling both may be an impossibility (Freeman, 2006). Other notable differences between the gifted and non-gifted in the world of work include gifted individuals tend to work at one single career for a lifetime, this career is a reflection of self and identity, gifted individuals demonstrate levels of involvement and commitment to a single thread of related task mastery events more so than the average individual, which could be viewed as a demonstration of an intensity of