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## How Are the Gifted? Point of View of University Students

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### Abstract

The aim of the study was to analyze the conceptions of giftedness of average university students as they influence attitudes and behaviors that positively or negatively influence the emotional, academic and social wellbeing of the gifted. The study design was mixed method; the sample was non-probabilistic with 74 participants who answered an open-ended question about the characteristics and behaviors of the gifted. The results showed that conceptions of giftedness are formed by socioemotional characteristics and intellectual characteristics. Some students reported a single category of characteristics, whilst other students showed a combination of components from both categories. The socioemotional characteristics were perceived by some students as negative, whilst others were positive, and some presented a mixture of these two valences. The above-average intelligence was related to the ease, speed and passion for learning and the negative socioemotional characteristics of the gifted.

**Keywords:** giftedness, conceptions of giftedness, gifted students, socioemotional characteristics, social-emotional problems.



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## Introduction

Within the international context, it is accepted that the gifted have unique social and affective characteristics and needs (Piechowski, 2006). However, in many countries, such as Mexico, it is common for gifted students to enter schools where the teaching process, rhythm and level of learning are focused on average-level students. Therefore, the study plans and their implementation are inadequate to achieve satisfaction in gifted students' development needs.

In education, from preschool right through to university, interpersonal relationships are essential for the adequate development and academic success in the life of the gifted (Needham, 2012). Positive social interaction implies adaptation and is based mainly on similar and shared needs and interests that support good communication, understanding and acceptance of the other. But when in a group, and there is a gifted student who thinks and feels different (Winner, 1996), how do his classmates perceive it?

The school and the classroom are related to the conceptions of giftedness that show the philosophies underlying the actions of the gifted (Schroth & Helfer, 2008). Conceptions are explanatory systems (Fontaines Ruiz, Medina, & Camacho, 2007) formed by beliefs and attitudes that give meaning to the world around us. In educational institutions, due to the plurality of students, there may be different conceptions of giftedness that strongly influence, positively or negatively, the perception, attitude and behaviors shown towards the gifted (Freeman, 2008).

The conceptions of giftedness of average students are important because they favor or obstruct the social support that the gifted can receive in their academic and socioemotional development. Knowledge of these conceptions of giftedness can help generate awareness programs about the characteristics and needs of the gifted in order to improve their socioemotional and academic conditions when attending mainstream schools. The aim of the current study was to analyze the conceptions of giftedness in average university students.

### *Literature Review*

The conception of giftedness is a sociocultural phenomenon (Tapper, 2012) that can change with time and place and, whatever its nature, intervenes in the acceptance or social rejection of the gifted and their abilities. Therefore, conceptions of giftedness need to be studied in each particular environment.

A component of the conceptions of giftedness is its definition, which depends on beliefs, customs, needs, values and attitudes of each culture (Bevan-Brown, 2011) and has been somewhat controversial over time. Giftedness is related to the psychometric perspective that identifies the gifted with an above average intelligence since Terman (1916) published the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale and formulated a ranking with ranges from an IQ of less than 25 (idiocy) at an IQ greater than 140 (equivalent to almost genius or genius). The criterion of intelligence above the average remains a relevant factor in the identification of the gifted in Western culture. The European Agency for the Development of Special Education reported that 15 countries, including the Czech Republic, Germany and Denmark, use the criterion for intelligence above the 130 mark in the detection of giftedness, whereas

in the Netherlands an IQ of greater than 120 is used (D'Alessio, 2009). In Korea, one of the main concepts that defines giftedness is intelligence (Kim, Shim, & Hull, 2009).

Studies of giftedness have been directed mainly at the detection of its characteristics that, although very diverse, some have been reported recurrently. Frasier et al. (1995), in a meta-analysis of gifted publications from 1957 to 1995, found reports that the gifted consistently presented motivation, unusual interests, communication skills, problem-solving ability, well-developed memory, questioning, insight, reasoning, imagination/creativity, sense of humor and advanced ability to work with a symbol system. Silverman (1995) detected as important characteristics of the gifted a good ability to reason, rapid learning, extensive vocabulary, excellent memory, great attention, personal sensitivity, compassion for others, perfectionism, intensity, moral sensitivity, unusual curiosity, perfectionism, intensity, perseverance when interested in something, and a high degree of energy, etc. Clark (1997) pointed to the universal characteristics of giftedness as fast learning, excellent memory and the ability to understand social and emotional aspects.

Other research found that the gifted have a passion for learning (Gross, 1998; Laine, 2010; Renzulli, 2002), ease and speed for learning (Laine, 2010), perfectionism (Renzulli, 1978; Speirs Neumeister, 2004), and perseverance (McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012; Snyder, Nietfeld, & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2011). Furthermore, the gifted have general socioemotional skills above that of their peers (Bacal, 2015). The set of attributes revealed in the studies showed that giftedness goes beyond intellectual abilities.

The conception of giftedness focused purely on intellectual abilities has been questioned. Renzulli (1978, 2005) argued that intelligence can be measured through psychometric tests, but also that there are some skills that cannot be evaluated in this way. In his theory of Three Rings, he proposed that giftedness is a product of the interaction between intellectual capacity superior to the average, commitment, creativity and its application in a potentially valuable area for society Renzulli (1978). In 2002, Renzulli integrated into his Three Rings model personal attributes such as optimism, courage, romance with a theme or discipline, sensitivity to human concerns, physical/mental energy and vision/sense of destiny (Renzulli, 2002). The interaction of these co-cognitive attributes with cognitive aspects is associated with success in school and with the integral development of human capacity, as they relate to the improvement of motivation and interpersonal skills, and support academic performance, research skills, creativity and problem solving. Sternberg (2005) argued that psychometric tests measure specific knowledge of the culture in which they were created and only in part the intellectual and academic skills. In the Pentagonal Implicit Theory of Giftedness, Sternberg (1995) proposed that for a person to be considered gifted they must meet five criteria: excellence, rarity, productivity, demonstrability, and value.

With the proposals of Renzulli (1978, 2002, 2005) and Sternberg (1995), among others, factors such as socioemotional and personal attributes are added to the study of giftedness in order to achieve a multifaceted vision of behavior in school and daily life as well as a greater understanding of the differences between giftedness and normality. This point of view of giftedness can cause misconceptions, stereotypes, myths and expectations not always recognized (Freeman, 2005) that can lead to barriers to the potential development of the gifted (Dweck, 1999).

One controversial issue is the association between giftedness and socioemotional problems. Janos and Robinson (1985) reported that between 20% and 25% of gifted children experience twice the difficulties of social and emotional adaptation when compared to average students. In higher education, gifted students can be seen by their peers as negative, challenging, with inappropriate decisions and opinions for simply being different to them (Gibson & Vialle, 2007) and in elementary school they often have experiences of bullying (Peterson & Ray, 2006). In gifted children and adults, depression and anxiety symptoms have been detected and it has been found that problems of emotional adjustment are more related to male gifted students than to students of average abilities (Preckel, Baudson, Krolak-Schwerdt, & Glock, 2015).

However, in the germinal study of Terman (1925), no evidence was found that gifted children would tend to be maladjusted more frequently than others. The results indicated that the gifted were superior to normal children in intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, moral and social traits, and that they were not essentially neurotic or had tendencies towards mental illness or maladjustment (Terman & Oden, 1959). Freeman (1998) argued that there was no consistent evidence to show that giftedness is related to emotional problems, but that there is evidence that the gifted have an emotional balance as good as that of any other person (Freeman, 2009). In a 30-year study in the UK, it was found that the gifted had as many emotional problems as those who were of average abilities (Freeman, 2001).

Martin, Burns, and Schonlau (2010), in a meta-analysis of mental health diagnostic rates, found that the gifted had lower rates of depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation than their peers. The gifted can be more mature socially and emotionally (Robinson, 2008), exhibiting fewer problematic behaviors (Richards, Encel, & Shute, 2003) and with better socioemotional skills than their non-gifted peers (Bacal, 2015; Bain, Bliss, Choates, & Sager, 2007).

Also, there are investigations that have shown the association between levels of giftedness and socioemotional problems. Burks, Jensen, and Terman (1930) reported that children in IQ ranges above 160 had difficulties in social adjustment, whilst Hollingworth (1926) reported that socially optimal intelligence was in the IQ range of 125 to 155 and that an IQ higher than 160 resulted in problems of social isolation (Hollingworth, 1931). Subotnik, Karp, and Morgan (1989) found that children with an IQ between 135 and 180, in adulthood had good physical and mental health, stable interpersonal relationships and that only 10% reported experiencing emotional problems.

The implicit conceptions of others have been reflected within the various investigations. In a Study of National Excellence: The case of the development of national talent in the United States reported that gifted students received negative stereotypes in schools and society (O'Connell, 1993). Plucker and Levy (2001) described that in the US, the life of the gifted was plagued with emotional problems such as depression and feelings of isolation. In Finland, the gifted are seen as frustrated, maladjusted, lonely and separated from their peers, and harassed; but occasionally possessing good social skills (Laine, 2010). In New Zealand, parents and educators with anecdotal support considered the gifted prone to developing more social and emotional problems than those of average abilities (Needham, 2012).

The gifted can be perceived by their peers as well-adapted or maladapted (Norman, Ramsay, Roberts, & Martray, 2000). These perceptions relate to the hypothesis of harmony, arguing that gifted students are well-adjusted, successful in life (Godor & Szymanski, 2017), and have similar socioemotional skills to their average-capacity peers (Baudson, 2016). The hypothesis of the lack of harmony suggests that the high intelligence of the gifted increases risk factors such as sensitivity, intensity and excess excitability that generates problems in adjustment (Godor & Szymanski, 2017; Preckel et al., 2015), and that they are socially and emotionally inferior to their peers (Baudson, 2016).

### Methodology

The design of the current study was mixed-method, because in a single research question it is possible to generate quantitative and qualitative information or generate questions of both these aspects (Creswell & Plano, 2007). The implementation process was of conversion, with qualitative data transformed into numerical codes and then statistically analyzed (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The sample is non-probabilistic, with 74 average students from a public university in Mexico.

Implicit conceptions of giftedness can be investigated by asking people about it. Yang and Sternberg (1997), in detecting the intelligence conceptions of Taiwanese Chinese, used an instrument with two questions: “According to your opinion: what are the characteristics of an intelligent person?” and “What are the behaviors of an intelligent person?” and Kim et al. (2009) asked participants on a white sheet listed characteristics and behaviors of giftedness. In the current study, an open-ended question was used: “According to your opinion: what are the characteristics and behaviors of the gifted?”

The application of the instrument was individual, using pencil and paper. With the answers, a database was generated and two coders analyzed its content through a reading and rereading process in order to identify key aspects reported in the specialized literature and emerging themes. All the extracts belonging to a specific category were read, analyzed and compared again so as to corroborate or reconsider their placement within a category or an emerging theme. Then, the percentages of the categories that were presented were obtained, and the information integrated in order to identify similarities and differences with theoretical proposals and previous investigations, and to obtain inferences related to the topic of study.

### Results

The answers of the students were seen as very diverse, and with a high-level frequency each represented several characteristics and behaviors of the gifted. In the conceptions of giftedness of average university students, the socioemotional characteristics and the intellectual characteristics showed similar percentages (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Components of conceptions of giftedness

Category	<i>n</i>	%
Socioemotional characteristics	49	66
Intellectual characteristics	48	64

\*percentage total > 100 for certain concepts

The socioemotional characteristics and the intellectual characteristics that included intelligence and associated concepts were presented as isolated categories and the combined (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Characteristics of the conceptions of giftedness

Category	<i>n</i>	%
Only socioemotional	26	35
Only intellectual	22	30
Socioemotional and intellectual blend	23	31
Unclassified	3	4

The appropriate socioemotional characteristics were seen slightly more frequently than socioemotional difficulties (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Socioemotional characteristics

Category	<i>n</i>	%
Positive	20	41
Negative	18	37
Blend of positive and negative	11	22

In the intellectual characteristics, the concepts of high intelligence, ease and speed of learning, and commitment appeared in the same number of students.

**Table 4.** Intellectual characteristics

Category	<i>n</i>	%
High intelligence	14	19
Ease and speed in learning	14	19
Commitment	14	19
Exceptional skills	12	16
Passion for learning	11	15

The socioemotional characteristics in the conceptions of giftedness were expressed with numerous ideas that created a global image of the gifted. In the positive aspect, the average students perceived the gifted as *responsible* (E34), *honest* (E49), *respectful* (E45), *calm* (E9), with *correct attitudes* (E52), *supportive, accessible and patient with people who need support* (E2, E29), and *comprehensive* (E32), etc. In the negative aspects, the average students believe that the gifted *do not know how to treat other people and are closed in friendships, they think that not everyone should speak to them* (E15), *they are a little antisocial* (E36), *selective with their friends, books, music, etc.* (E17). In addition, the gifted can be seen as being *conceited* (E29), *arrogant* (E44), *selfish* (E45), *egocentric* (E15), *introverted*, (E59), *shy and inhibited* (E72), and *they are retracted so that they do not disturb them* (E58).

Some students explained the causes of difficulties in social interaction of the gifted: A gifted *is a very clever and intelligent person to such a degree that, sometimes they think too much and they lock themselves within* (E58), and that *probably they are somewhat misunderstood by average people and maybe that makes them somewhat isolated* (E18). Other students considered the differences between the gifted and themselves influence the socioemotional difficulties, stating that *the gifted have different behaviors to people*

*classified as "normal" so they are not so social and talk only with people of the same level (E47) and by their logic, we are somewhat irritable or misunderstood when communicating (E38), and the gifted can have problems of social interaction in the school environment because the content of their subjects and the level of their other classmates may not interest them (E6).*

The concept of intelligence was associated with a higher IQ and differences with the average student. The gifted *is more intelligent than some other people (E8), has a higher intellect (E23) that exceeds the average (E36). Students thought that intelligence allows the gifted to understand what they do and why they do it, especially with different ideas about what is known in all areas of life (E32), and the gifted have a more developed intelligence than most, sometimes neglecting others; for example, social or mathematical (E61).*

The gifted *learn quickly and easily and have a passion for learning: they have a greater need to know (E39), hunger for knowledge and desire to learn (E66), have a compulsive desire to learn and to know more about the environment that surrounds them (E6). The gifted have a capacity to learn very fast (E33), and to do something just by looking at it (E20). The gifted are always studying (E7), looking for something new to learn and they read a lot (E63) so they stand out from the rest in terms of their general knowledge (E28), they have a lot of knowledge about various scientific, historical subjects (E57), that is, they are very educated (E24). Another characteristic mentioned of the gifted was commitment. The gifted are committed to what they do (E62), dedicated (E54), perseverant in their tasks (E23), and they persist in solving processes or mental works (E38).*

In the conceptions of giftedness of some students, the concept of extraordinary abilities was presented. The gifted *have abilities that a person that is not considered gifted does not have (E62), that is, they have unique abilities and abilities, different from the others (E1), a complete domain of one or several sciences in a simple and versatile way (E35), and sometimes they neglect an area (E63). The gifted is someone fully competent in something specific (E21), with extraordinary abilities in a certain activity (E19), which makes them stand out in everything they do (E17), and goes beyond what is normally expected (E52).*

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In many of the conceptions of giftedness of average university students, the socioemotional characteristics and the intellectual characteristics reportedly showed very similar percentages. This result indicates that the concept of giftedness goes beyond intelligence, integrating co-cognitive attributes that show a multifaceted vision of the person (Renzulli, 1978, 2002, 2005) and reveals that intelligence is an important criterion for the detection of talents.

The socioemotional characteristics and the intellectual characteristics were presented as isolated categories that also mixed. One explanation is that both categories of characteristics can be an axis for the identification of the gifted, because they allow for the perceiving of differences between the behavior of gifted students and average students. Why does a student choose one, another or both? This is an interesting question to investigate.

Some students reported perceiving the gifted with positive socioemotional characteristics, whereas others see them with negative characteristics, and a smaller group of students perceive them with a mixture of both these behavior types. The coexistence of

hypotheses of harmony and lack of harmony supports the results of Norman et al. (2000), that the gifted can be perceived by their peers as well-adapted or maladapted. An explanation of the positive and negative socioemotional duality between students, and in the same student, is in the evaluation of academic and life experiences, and can be as a whole or dividing them into parts and making a value judgment for each of them. This last alternative allows the same participant to perceive positive and negative and negative social and emotional characteristics in the gifted. However, seeing particularly the presence of both positive and negative socioemotional characteristics in the same student is a topic in need of further exploration. Moreover, the different ways of perceiving socioemotional characteristics also support the argument of Phillipson (2007), in that within the same school and classroom, the diversity of social groups may have different conceptions of giftedness.

The negative socioemotional characteristics of the gifted perceived by average students in the current study support previous research by Gibson and Vialle (2007), Laine (2010), Needham (2012), O'Connell (1993), and Plucker and Levy (2001). Negative socioemotional characteristics can also be related to a social imaginary that does not take into account IC (intrapersonal catalyst) and that overgeneralizes traits of very high intelligence levels. Gifted individuals with CI greater than 160 have difficulties in social adjustment and isolation (Burks et al., 1930; Hollingworth, 1925, 1931) and, in an IQ range of 135 to 180, only 10% of the gifted are reported to present emotional problems (Subotnik et al., 1989).

From the point of view of average students, difficulties in the social interaction of the gifted are caused by their high intelligence that is associated with behaviors and interests different from that of others. These differences imply that their peers can hardly understand their needs and this can promote problems of social interaction. However, the awareness of these differences can influence the acceptance of diversity and the perception of the positive socioemotional characteristics of the gifted.

The perception of average students to differences with the gifted extended to extraordinary abilities, particularly to the components of excellence and rarity of the implied pentagonal theory of giftedness (Sternberg, 1995). Students reported that extraordinary abilities can occur in any activity that the gifted performs, or only in one area of knowledge or life. These two aspects are traditionally associated with general intelligence and specific intelligence, respectively.

Intelligence was associated with the ease, speed, and passion for learning that was, at the same time, related to constant reading and studying, as well as perseverance for the achievement of a goal. Similar results were also previously reported by Clark (1997), Gross (1998), Laine (2010), McClain and Pfeiffer (2012), Renzulli (1978, 2002, 2005), Silverman (1995), and Snyder et al. (2011).

The conceptions of giftedness of the average university students were formed by socioemotional characteristics and intellectual characteristics. The gifted can be perceived by their peers as adapted or maladapted. The students attributed the negative characteristics of the gifted to their high intelligence, and that this difference made them misunderstood, hence problems with social interaction can arise.

## Notes

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