

Concept Paper

Beyond Transformational Giftedness

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Abstract: This article discusses kinds of transformational giftedness, or giftedness that makes a positive, meaningful, and possibly enduring difference to the world. We extend previous work by suggesting that there are two kinds of transformation that matter: self-transformation and other-transformation. Combining these two kinds of transformation yields a 2×2 grid of four kinds of giftedness: non-transformational giftedness (no transformation), transformational giftedness (self- and other-transformation combined), self-realized giftedness (whereby one transforms oneself but not others), and other-realized giftedness (whereby one transforms others but not oneself). We open with a discussion of some of the history of conceptions of giftedness. Then we discuss transformational giftedness as it has been defined in the recent past. We then introduce our concepts of self- and other-transformation. We also describe two other kinds of giftedness—inert giftedness, which is giftedness in personal attributes that has not been realized in interactions with others and the world; and transactional giftedness, which is a give-and-take form of giftedness whereby one meets certain societal expectations in exchange for being identified as gifted. We finally conclude that the gifted movement needs to focus much more on developing transformational giftedness, or at least the potential for it, in our young people.

Keywords: transactional giftedness; inert giftedness; other-transformational giftedness; transformational giftedness; self-transformational giftedness; giftedness



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1. Beyond Transformational Giftedness

If there is one thing the world needs right now, it is gifted individuals. There are so many problems, ranging from global climate change to pandemics to enormous income disparities to uncontrolled obesity. The world needs gifted individuals to contribute toward the solution of these problems.

How, though, should giftedness be conceptualized? Many conceptions of giftedness have been proposed, a number of which are reviewed immediately below. We, however, have chosen to build upon Sternberg's notion of transformational vs. transactional giftedness, suggesting that this conception, as it exists, is an excellent start but is missing some elements [1,2]. People who are transformationally gifted seek to make positive and meaningful changes to the world, at some level. We have proposed to expand the model and, perhaps, to complete it by considering the concept of transformation in more detail than Sternberg did in his original articles.

2. History of Some Conceptions of Giftedness

The question always is exactly what one means by “gifted”. Over time, scholars have had somewhat different ideas. For example, Sir Francis Galton believed that gifted

individuals excel in psychophysical skills, such as recognizing differences between similar visual stimuli or pitches [3]. He also believed these skills are largely hereditary—passed on from one generation to the next via our genes [4]. Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon had a very different conception, relating intelligence more to judgmental abilities [5]. However, Binet and Simon's primary interest was in children with intellectual challenges rather than in those who were gifted. The challenge of developing Binet's ideas was taken up by Lewis Terman, a professor at Stanford University, to operationalize Binet and Simon's ideas for the gifted. Terman adopted the idea of giftedness as recognizable by an IQ of over 140, or roughly $2\frac{1}{2}$ standard deviations above the mean score of 100 on the version of Binet's test he created [6,7].

Over the years, many other conceptions of giftedness have evolved. For example, Renzulli proposed that above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment intersect to form giftedness [8,9]; Tannenbaum suggested general ability, special aptitudes, non-intellective requisites, environmental supports, and chance in his "sea-star" model [10]. Some theorists have gone beyond the usual boundaries of such conceptions. For example, Sisk has gone further in her suggestion of a form of spiritual intelligence as a basis for giftedness [11]. This intelligence was considered but ultimately not included by Gardner in his model of multiple intelligences [12].

Further, Ziegler has proposed an actiotope model, according to which giftedness is not an internal property of an individual but rather the result of a label assigned by experts that represents interactions that an individual has with the environment [13]. Gagné has proposed a differentiated model of giftedness and talent (DMGT), according to which one can distinguish the gifts with which one starts life, from talents, which develop out of gifts [14,15]. Gagné further distinguishes among intellectual, creative, socio-affective, and sensorimotor abilities, as well as among academic, artistic, business, leisure, social affective, athletic, and technological talents. Dai, in his evolving-complexity theory, suggests that giftedness should be viewed developmentally by treating the developing individual as an open, dynamic, and adaptive system, which changes itself (similarly to Ziegler's notion) as it interacts with the opportunities as well as the challenges that the environment provides [16]. Subotnik et al. have proposed a so-called "megamodel," according to which "giftedness (a) reflects the values of society; (b) is typically manifested in actual outcomes, especially in adulthood; (c) is specific to domains of endeavor; (d) is the result of the coalescing of biological, pedagogical, psychological, and psychosocial factors; and (e) is relative not just to the ordinary (e.g., a child with exceptional art ability compared to peers) but to the extraordinary (e.g., an artist who revolutionizes a field of art)" [17] (p. 3) [18]. And Cross and Cross have proposed a school-based conception of giftedness, which emphasizes the various domains of giftedness that schools seek and recognize [19].

All of these models assume, at some level, that there is an identifiable group of people within the larger population who, one way or another, can be designated as "gifted," "talented," or both [20–22]. What differs among the models is precisely what set of attributes or behaviors constitutes giftedness, and how context affects the identification of the attributes in that set.

Edited compendia of conceptions of giftedness have been published from time to time by Sternberg and his colleagues [23–26]. Histories of conceptions and how they have played out in society have been written by Margolin and by Jolly [27,28]. But these conceptions have been variable in how quickly and easily they have taken hold in gifted identification programs in schools. Moreover, the conceptions and the ways they have been implemented sometimes have had racist, classist, or other prejudicial elements (see [29,30]).

Most of the models of giftedness that have been proposed have focused on aspects of the person, such as intelligence, creativity, and motivation. Some have included environmental factors as well that either facilitate or hinder the expression of giftedness. Recently, Sternberg has suggested a somewhat different functional account, inspired in part by theories of transactional and transformational leadership [1,2,31–33].

3. Transformational and Transactional Giftedness

Sternberg has defined transformational giftedness as giftedness that, by its nature, is deployed to make a positive change in the world at some level of analysis [2]. Transformationally gifted individuals seek to make the world a better place (see also [34]). People who are transformationally gifted are so by virtue of the function to which they direct their giftedness. They seek to create positive, meaningful, and hopefully, enduring change. In contrast, transactional giftedness is giftedness that is tit-for-tat, representing a form of give and take. A transactionally gifted individual is identified as “gifted” and then is expected to give something back in return. They may be expected to have a string of successes on standardized tests, or to get good grades in school, or to be admitted to prestigious colleges and universities, or to attain prestigious occupational postings and then to excel in them.

Transactional or transformational giftedness do not result merely from someone being born with a particular set of traits. Rather, they result from the kind of give-back the gifted person offers—either an exchange of services (transactional giftedness) or a positive, meaningful, and possibly enduring change in the world. The focus of the current article, however, is on transformational, not transactional giftedness.

The two types of giftedness are not mutually exclusive. Transformationally gifted individuals are often extremely determined to make the positive changes that they wish to make. This kind of resilience helps them to excel in their field. Therefore, most transformationally gifted people are sufficiently transactionally gifted that they can reach a position in society from which they can make the meaningful difference they seek to make. Some programs, such as the Schoolwide Enrichment Model, may help develop aspects of transformational giftedness [35].

There are many measures of transactional giftedness—virtually all the measures that currently are used to assess giftedness. One might wonder whether transformational giftedness similarly can be measured, or whether it is either immeasurable or measurable only after one’s career is over, and one can assess that career in retrospect. Just as measures of transactional giftedness are actually predictors of transactional giftedness rather than measures of transactional achievement, so, we suggest, is it possible to predict transformational giftedness. The transformational-giftedness scale we are currently exploring in our empirical research is shown in Table 1. It is taken from Sternberg [36]. It is available for research purposes for those wishing to use it.

Table 1. STGS: Preliminary Version.

Part I.

1. Write a paragraph about what your future dream life in 25 years would look like, with the constraint that there is a chance of achieving it.
2. What are you passionate about? How would you expect that passion to affect your future life?
3. Design an App. What is its purpose and how does it accomplish it?

Part II.

1. What would you most like to accomplish in your life? How will you get from where you are to where you want to be to accomplish that thing?
2. What are two other things you would like to accomplish in your life?
3. When you are older, how will you decide if you are satisfied with what you have done in your life?
4. What do you see as the biggest obstacle to accomplishing your principal goal in life and how will you overcome it?

Part III.

1. Pick a major world problem. What are things you personally could do to help solve the problem? How could you do them?
 2. What are things the country in which you live could do to help solve the problem you chose? How could the country do them?
 3. Have you done anything in your life that you believe helps to make the world a better place? If so, what?
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Table 1. Cont.

Part IV.

1. What is the one thing you have done in your life of which you are most proud? Why are you proud of it?

Part V

1. If you were to change one thing in the world, what would it be?

Part VI

1. Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi both defied the laws of their times and went to prison for their beliefs. Did they do the right thing in defying the law? Why or why not?
2. Suppose you had a belief about how things in the world need to change. But other people close to you told you they disagreed with you. What would you do?
3. Do you think there might be a time in your life when it will be better to be right than to be well-liked? If so, what might an example be?

Part VII

1. If a lot of people believe something, do you generally conclude that it is most likely true? Why or why not?
2. Have you had any beliefs that you used to accept but that you no longer accept? If so, what changed your mind, and why?
3. Can you think of a belief most people have that you do not accept? If so, what is it and why do you not accept it?

Scoring: Scoring is by the consensual assessment technique. Judges are asked to rate the extent to which each response reflects, on a 1–5 scale, a transformational rather than merely transactional mindset. Adapted from: Sternberg, R. J. (2021b). Transformational vs. transactional deployment of intelligence. *Journal of Intelligence*, 9(15), <https://doi.org/10.3390/jintelligence9010015>. Reprinted with permission. This measure was developed by Robert J. Sternberg in collaboration with Aakash Chowkase, Ophélie Desmet, Sareh Karami, Jenna Landy, Jennifer Long, and Jialin Lu.

4. Other-Transformational vs. Self-Transformational Giftedness

In reflecting upon the concept of transformational giftedness, we have concluded that the concept needs expansion. In particular, there appear to be two kinds of transformational giftedness that lead to “transformations” in the sense of changing one thing into something different and perhaps very different. Thus, we make a proposal that we believe helps to “complete” Sternberg’s model.

Other-transformational giftedness refers to the direction of one’s giftedness toward making a transformative difference with respect to others—making a positive, meaningful, and possibly enduring difference to the world. This concept appears to be similar to what Sternberg [1,2] referred to as transformational giftedness.

Self-transformational giftedness refers to the direction of one’s giftedness toward making a transformative difference with respect to oneself—to making a positive, meaningful, and possibly enduring difference within oneself. For many individuals, self-transformational giftedness is a preliminary to other-transformational giftedness. One finds one’s purpose in life [37] or in becoming, in Maslow’s terms, self-actualized [38].

On this view, people do not just simply transform the world at some level. Rather, first, they find a purpose in life—they self-actualize in terms of whatever is meaningful to them [39]. This purpose and its corresponding goal or set of goals become clear to them. In other words, self-transformational giftedness becomes a base from which transformational giftedness arises.

Figure 1 shows our newly proposed model. It links self- and other-transformational giftedness to generate four kinds of functional giftedness.

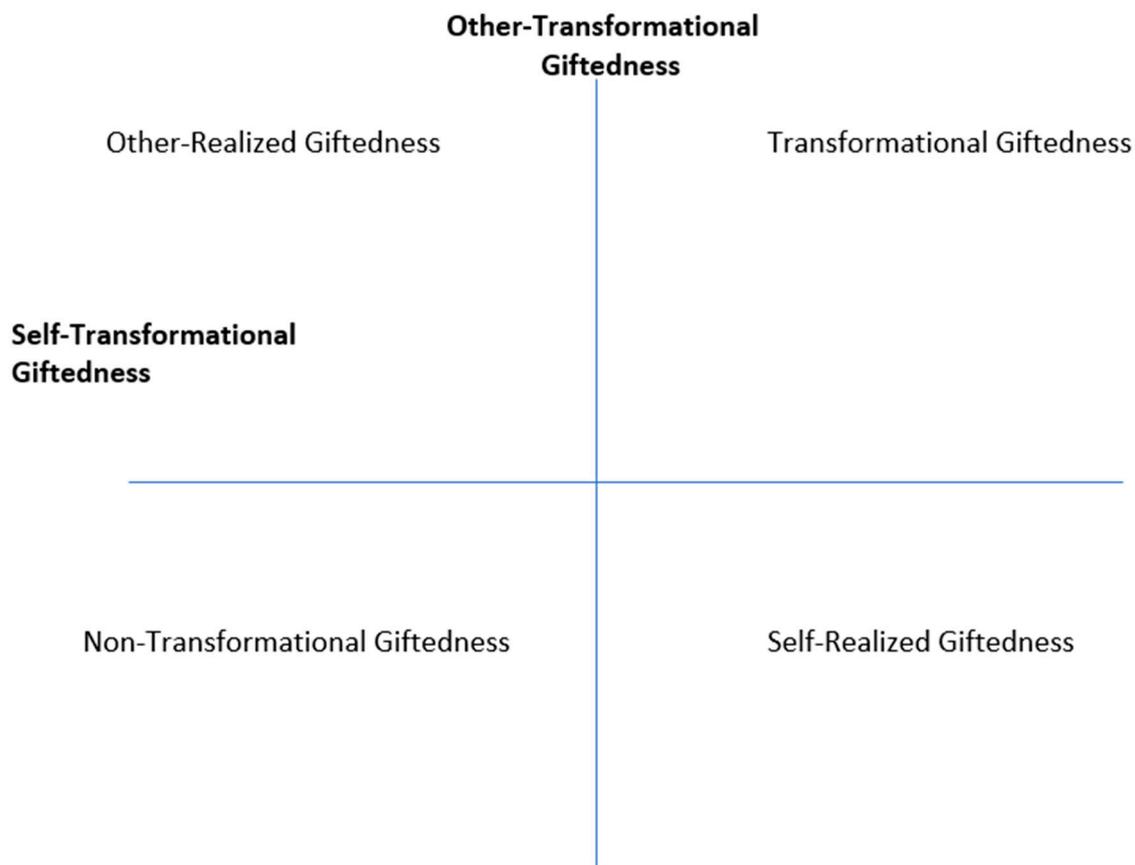


Figure 1. Other-transformational and self-transformational giftedness. The x -axis (horizontal axis) represents either low (left quadrants) or high (right quadrants) levels of self-transformational giftedness. The y -axis (vertical axis) represents either low (lower quadrants) or high (upper quadrants) levels of other-transformational giftedness. Inert (Immobilized) Giftedness is giftedness in the absence of transactional and both self-directed and other-directed transformational giftedness. Transactional Giftedness is on a different dimension, not shown in the figure. Thus, it crosses all the quadrants as a separate dimension.

5. Non-Transformational Giftedness

In the lower-left quadrant, where we have neither other- nor self-transformational giftedness, we have non-transformational giftedness. The giftedness has not been directed toward transformation. Someone in this quadrant may be gifted. Indeed, they may be either inertly or transactionally gifted at any level. They simply lack transformational giftedness of any kind.

Inert giftedness is, perhaps oddly, the kind of giftedness that educational institutions have most emphasized in their identification procedures and in much of their education. Inert giftedness is displayed in having the personal qualities that identify one as gifted but not necessarily as showing any signs of having used these qualities to make any positive and meaningful difference of any kind. One simply possesses identified personal qualities that are sitting in oneself, waiting to be used in some way. Even adults may be inertly gifted. They may have a high IQ or have shown unusual talents on gifted identification measures. But they have not (at least, yet) used their gifts actively. Their last great accomplishment may have been their high scores on a standardized test or their elite university education with which they have done little. Inert giftedness is not shown in Figure 1, as it is neither self- nor other-transformational.

Inert giftedness is similar, perhaps, to what Renzulli refers to as “schoolhouse giftedness” [40]. Inert giftedness also is similar to what Gagné has called “outstanding natural abilities” or “gifts” [14,15]. And it is similar to Tannenbaum’s notion of “promise” or “potential for gifted fulfillment” [10]. Gagné and Tannenbaum have viewed giftedness as

a developmental concept, whereas inert giftedness is only a starting point, but hopefully not an endpoint, to developing “talent,” in Gagné’s words, or “fulfillment of potential”, in Tannenbaum’s words. Our notion of inert giftedness is similar in that it is a type of giftedness that has not been realized yet. Whatever label one uses, the inertly gifted person has the qualifications to be identified as gifted but stops there because they have not displayed their giftedness in a meaningful societal way.

Transactional giftedness, as noted above, does require some kind of accomplishment. The transactionally gifted individual has given something back—in exchange for their being identified as gifted, they have achieved high grades, or college or university success, or success in a job. But they are in the mode of give-and-take rather than of meaningful change. Transactional giftedness is not shown in Figure 1, as it is a separate dimension from transformational giftedness. Transformationally gifted individuals almost always know, at some level, how to be transactional when they need to be, but transactionally gifted individuals may or may not be transformationally gifted. Most probably are not. The transactionally gifted person gives back to society, but in a way that requires them to receive something concrete in exchange for what they have given.

6. Transformational Giftedness

Transformational giftedness is represented in the quadrant, in the upper-right, that we have considered above. The individual has transformed themselves—has found their purpose and passion—and has directed themselves toward making the world a better place. They may be adults, of course, as in the case of Martin Luther King, Jr., Albert Einstein, Mother Teresa, or Nelson Mandela. But they also may be adolescents, as in the case of Malala Yousafzai, who was shot for advocating the rights of young women to an education in Pakistan, or Greta Thunberg, who has started a worldwide movement of young people advocating for action to combat climate change. The transformationally gifted person gives without any necessary expectation of a give-back. The main reward for them is the transformation that they hope to help achieve.

Transformational giftedness is not equivalent to mere social engagement or activism. Many social activists simply advocate for causes, following in the possibly admirable, but also well-worn paths of activists who came before them. They echo the messages of others. Like so many people in any other pursuit, you generally never hear about them.

Then there are activists such as those mentioned above—Malala Yousafzai, who at the age of 21 has over 6 million hits on Google; and Greta Thunberg, who, at the age of 18, has roughly 19 million hits on Google. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who at the age of 31 has roughly 14 million hits, turned a career as a progressive social activist into a stint as a Representative in the United States Congress. Some who seek transformation represent a different perspective, such as conservative commentator Ben Shapiro, age 37, with roughly 46 million hits on Google. The point is not the politics or the social activism or whether one believes in their cause, but rather the successful transformation they achieve through their efforts.

7. Self-Realized Giftedness

Self-realized giftedness is represented in the lower-right quadrant of the figure. It refers to people who have transformed themselves to find a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives, but who have not, at least yet, translated this self-transformation into a transformation that also impacts the world at some level. They may simply have not yet gotten to other-transformation, or they may have no desire to get to it. One could imagine, for example, someone who has found a sense of peace, balance, and meaning within their life, but whose sense of purpose simply does not extend, at a given point in their life, to transforming the lives of others. The self-realized gifted person’s gift, in essence, is to themselves. They may find peace and harmony on top of a mountain with no interpersonal contacts, or they may find that peace and harmony in the context of interactions with

others. But the gift is in their transformation of self. The interactions may help achieve that transformation but are not the recipients of it.

Who are the famous people with self-realized giftedness? Not many. That is the point: they do not seek fame, but rather, spiritual fulfillment, and often, withdrawal and even isolation. They are content to develop their own self-actualization without seeking fame or other forms of recognition in the world. They may become nuns, or monks, or philosophers on a metaphorical mountaintop. Or they may be next-door neighbors who have achieved self-actualization but have no need or desire to impose it on, or perhaps even share it with, others. They may teach religion or spirituality or yoga or meditation or mindfulness, but their goal is not to make a big splash, but rather to share in a limited way the heights they have reached. The Dalai Lama has been thrust into the role of an ambassador for mindfulness and spirituality but probably has in common many characteristics with those who are self-realized gifted.

8. Other-Realized Giftedness

Other-realized giftedness, represented in the upper-left quadrant of the figure, refers to a realization by people who have made a difference to others but who have not transformed themselves. They are making a difference, but they lack a clear sense of inner direction and purpose. They either may be doing what they are doing because others have put them up to it or because they happened to stumble upon some way in which they can make a difference. But they have not reflected as to why they are doing what they are doing and why it matters for fulfilling themselves and the world. The other-realized gifted person makes a difference to others but may themselves have achieved little or no internal transformation—they direct their gifts fully outwardly, often at the cost of their own self-development.

There are so many examples of people with other-realized giftedness, whose lives have transformed others but at their own expense. Notable examples are popular-music stars such as Elvis Presley, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Keith Moon. They made a huge difference to others but utterly failed to get their own lives together. F. Scott Fitzgerald died of alcoholism at age 44 and various other literary geniuses committed suicide, such as Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, and Virginia Woolf. These individuals transformed the lives of others but never were able to transform their own lives to deal with their greatness, their inner struggles, or both. These individuals made important positive transformations in society, but perhaps at their own expense.

9. Conclusions

We suggest that, if the world is truly to become a better place, we need to develop gifts that are self- and other-transformational. Developing giftedness in children is not just about accelerating them in some subject, or about enriching their learning about that subject matter. Rather, such development is in helping the children find purpose and meaning in their lives and then making a positive, meaningful, and possibly enduring difference to others through the sense of purpose they have developed. To that end, educators and schools may be able to help young individuals develop an understanding of their inner self, guide them to find more purposeful life goals, motivate them to empathize with others and with nature around them, help them develop compassion for others' suffering, and cultivate attitudes of the inherent oneness that underlies humanity. Schools striving to develop transformational giftedness may not shy away from exposing students to the issues of social injustice and inequity prevalent in human societies.

One can be gifted without being transformationally gifted. But we suggest that if society wants to solve the many problems confronting it, it must develop young people who are not just gifted but gifted in a transformational way. Society must develop the young people who will find meaning in life that will transform them, and then who will make a positive, meaningful, and possibly enduring difference to a world desperately in need of positive change.

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Summary: Historically, giftedness has been viewed as a single attribute, with the concept of giftedness often operationalized by a minimum IQ score or combination of an IQ score with measures of school achievement. But gifted individuals, as traditionally defined and educated, have not proven up to the task of meeting the grave challenges of contemporary life, such as pandemics, global climate change, weapons of mass destruction, pollution, income disparities, hunger, and repressive governments. We propose that giftedness needs to be conceptualized in a more variegated and practically useful way. For the first time, we propose eight categories of giftedness, which expand upon two categories initially proposed by Robert J. Sternberg. The traditional form of giftedness is viewed as "transactional giftedness," whereby those identified are expected to give back to society in proportion to the extra resources invested in them. People who are identified but who do not give back are referred to here as "inertly" gifted. We distinguish transactional from transformational giftedness. Self-transformational giftedness involves a positive restructuring of the self; other-transformational giftedness involves restructuring life for others; and fully transformational giftedness involves transforming both the self and others. Giftedness also can be destructive, either of the self, others, or both.

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