

Where Do The Failed 0.1% Go?

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DID you ever wonder what all those extraordinarily gifted people do who never received any support in their early years? Where did they end up after leaving school, university, and their parent's home, and how do they spend their lives today? Most of all, though, what can we do to improve the situation of those people?

I know two of such people in real life, both with IQs beyond the 3rd standard deviation (145+). Both of them never found an acceptable spot in life. They are alone to a degree that borders on isolation, and the feeling of being cut off from all others only increases when they leave their homes and dare to go out. Both of them suffer from hopelessness that is resistant to any form of therapy, and both of them regularly think about suicide. This is not only a tragic story on a personal level, it is also a terrible waste that some of the more brilliant minds on our planet have to bear a marginal existence without love and without purpose.

Of course a sample size of two is small, but that is what I have. So what did those people have in common in their childhoods that basically made them drop out of society? Which traits do they share?

Both of them learned about their IQs in their teen years, but knowing that did not make any difference to them. They struggled in school at multiple levels: they did not get along with their peers and they saw no meaning in the curriculum of basic education.

The Guy

One of them, a boy, refused to do homework and argued that he already knew everything because he listened (sometimes) while taking part in the lessons. His grades were below average, but he achieved that while never, ever having as much as a single glimpse into one of the textbooks. Teachers disliked him, because they knew how easily he picked up information, but then he never made an effort to improve his grades. His peers avoided him and left him alone, because they did not know how to deal with him.

He eventually dropped out of school, managed to get admission to university, studied for a few years and then also dropped out of university, because he did not get along with the people. He mastered the curriculum with ease, but was overwhelmed by the social interactions in that vast machine that is college-level

education, maybe because he never had learned how to interact with people earlier in his life.

After leaving university, he worked various jobs, often excelled in them, but eventually quit or was fired, because he did not get along with colleagues and superiors. In his free time, he was alone and never able to make any friends. Whenever he tried, he quickly became bored and self-conscious. People thought he was weird and maybe a bit dumb, because he did not seem to have much common sense. He in turn thought that common sense was overrated and started to dislike people for their stupidity. Eventually his anxiety increased to a level where he barely ever left his apartment. He lived in poverty for extended periods in his life, isolated and desperate. Getting a job became harder and harder, because he learned that he simply did not fit in.

The Girl

The other one, a girl, enjoyed school, but also found the curriculum too easy. She achieved good to excellent grades, but on the other hand had greater trouble getting along with her peers, because they did not share her interest in all kinds of new things to learn. She was bullied and ridiculed a lot by her class mates. When she went to high school, she thought that now, finally, she was going to meet people who shared her interests. Of course that did not happen. Nor did it happen later in job training.

The girl became long-term unemployed immediately after a very successful job training. She became afraid of people noticing her existence and for a long time barely left her apartment. However, she felt desperate when she was on her own, so she perpetually oscillated between being alone and desperate and being among people and socially overwhelmed. Even now she basically does not see any purpose at all in her life.

Both of them came from families where one parent was an intellectual and the other parent was not interested at all in intellectual activities to the degree that they considered independent thinking to be detrimental to social success and happiness in life. In both cases the parent that disliked independent thinking was the primary attachment figure of the gifted child, while the other parent was unavailable most of the time.

Both grew up in rather rural areas where intellectual challenges were rare and people had no respect for thinkers, so they spent most of their free time on their own.

Both of them had no trouble at all achieving acceptable or even exceptional results during their time at school, university, and in job training, but both could not make any use of their abilities, because they lacked the necessary social connections. Finally meeting people on an equal intellectual level improved that part, but only to some degree. Over the years, both developed a mixture of hatred and anxiety with regard to fellow human beings, because they perceived them as competitive, aggressive, and stupid. This, in turn, led to being rejected, which in turn led to a vicious circle.

Each of them had more than hundred hours of counseling, which did not help at all. When one of them learned that their high IQ might cause some of the trouble they experienced, they once again looked for professional help, only to find out that the problem is widely unknown out there. Many people, including those of the helping professions, seem to think that high or exceptional IQs and social problems exclude each other. Most of the consulted psychologists denied that the problem exists at all and were quick to diagnose depression and prescribe medication. This, of course, only contributed to the feeling of being at fault in the gifted person and was not helpful at all. In one of the cases presented here, psychotherapy did not change anything, in the other it caused more harm than good.

What Can We Do?

Much is being written about extraordinarily gifted children these days and we now know pretty well what to do in order to avoid scenarios like the above. However, there still will be cases where the necessary support will not be given, and then there are those whose lives already have failed. What to do about them? I can imagine three vectors of change.

Most of all, members of the helping professions should be aware of the problem. I talked to some psychologists and most of them were unaware of the problem and a few outright denied that it exists at all. This can cause a lot of damage in those who seek help in the wrong places. So professionals should be informed about the particularities of having a high IQ, especially about the problems of those with IQs above 145, like the “window of comprehension”,¹ which suggests that no meaningful communication is possible among people not sharing a common window of 30 IQ points.

¹ Simonton; *Psychological Review*, 92, 532–547 (1985) and Fraser; “On Being Invisible – The Highly Gifted Child”; *Vidya* #320/321

Ideally, this subject should be discussed in the curricula of the studies of psychiatry and psychology but, as a beginning, it would be helpful to write articles in psychological journals and suggest research topics to those doing research in the areas of psychology and psychotherapy.

Then, the public should be informed about the implications of having an extraordinary IQ. There are too many myths regarding high IQs, leading to the assumption that highly intelligent people are always successful, well-achieving, respected members of society. Unfortunately, this often leads to the (fallacious) converse argument that people with social problems cannot have high IQs which, in turn, supports the (also false) assumption that high-IQ social outcasts are imposters. So it would be important to place articles revealing the less-desired facets of high IQ in the mainstream media.

Doing so could in the long run help outcasts to be able to speak about their troubles more openly. At the moment, mentioning an extraordinary IQ often leads to jealousy and resistance, because it is exclusively viewed as something that is socially desirable. Then, of course, educating the public could also help friends or family of failed high-IQ people to understand their problems or, in case the gifted person does not already know, point them to the subject.

Finally, a platform for those extraordinarily gifted people who failed to find a place in life could be helpful. Of course, high-IQ societies exist, but then most of their members appear to be rather successful and hence limited in their understanding of people who never achieved much, if anything, in life. Of course, sympathy and understanding is also present in many who did better, and exchange with those can also be very helpful. This is why such a platform should be open to both, high IQ outcasts and those who managed to shape their life in a more desirable way, but still think that the subject discussed here needs improvement.

Such a platform could not only serve the exchange of members but also the coordination of the other efforts outlined above, namely, informing, educating, and inspiring further research.

If you are interested in the subject, feel free to contact the author.