I was first introduced to the field of giftedness when a client walked into my office with a copy of the book *Gifted Grownups: The Mixed Blessings of Extraordinary Potential* by Marylou Kelly Streznewski and said, “You have to read this book. This is me!” I read it, and recognized myself as well. The book explained that most gifted adults don’t know they are gifted, and why so many people with great potential actually struggle in both school and social settings.

Once only defined by IQ scores and academic success, giftedness is now seen more as the *capacity* for higher development and a drive to move the world from “what is” to “what ought to be” (Lind, 2001). Giftedness today is seen as a *whole person phenomenon*, which means that this great capacity derives not just from ability, but also from sensitivities, intensities, and a heightened sense of life. You may be working with clients who are gifted, whether they realize it or not, and whose unique characteristics may have been pathologized.

Some of the characteristics indicative of giftedness are (Streznewski, 1999): curiosity, energy, speed of learning or of getting things done, empathy, sensitivity to both beauty and pain, a highly developed moral sense and a need to speak up, ability to see patterns and analogies and to do abstract thinking, playfulness and intensity. Other qualities are (Lovecky, 1986): perceptivity: the ability to use intuition, abstract thinking, and empathy to see through many layers of self, others and societies; entelechy: a drive towards fulfilling one’s potential; and divergency: uniqueness of thought, feeling, ideas and personality. This depth and breadth of thinking and experience predispose the gifted individual to be idealistic, concerned with moral issues and to feel a strong desire for social justice. Many of these qualities can set the gifted person up for being profoundly misunderstood and/or pathologized in life.

This heightened and intense experience of life is described in Kazimerz Dabrowski’s “Over-excitabilities.” Dabrowski (1902-1980), a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist, believed that what was called “psychoneurotic” was not necessarily a defect or an illness (Dabrowski, 1972). He developed his Theory of Positive Disintegration out of his belief that conflict and inner suffering were necessary for advanced development of both the individual and the human race. He identified several innate characteristics he called overexcitabilities (OE) which, when combined with talent and intelligence, are predictive of advanced capacity for growth (Lind, 2001). In his work with patients, Dabrowski noticed that developmental potential went hand in hand with five basic psychic overexcitabilities: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginative, and emotional (Dabrowski, 1972).
Psychomotor OE refers to an innate physical energy and need to be active. This person may talk a lot, speak very quickly, get up and move around, fidget, interrupt, or be the class clown. If channeled well, the person with psychomotor OE could become an athlete, dancer, actor, comedian, or racecar driver. Some people, however, might find those with psychomotor OE to be “too much” and they are often diagnosed or misdiagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Lind, 2001; Webb, 2005). The challenge (as with any of the OEs) is channeling this energy in positive ways.

Those with Sensual OE have a heightened sense of sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing. A person with sensual OE may cut the tags out of her shirts, be very sensitive to smells, temperatures, lights, etc. (Lind, 2001). This is the princess and the pea. Someone with sensual OE will have a great love of music, art, languages, fabrics, foods, and sex. On the other hand, this person can be easily overwhelmed by sensual input and need to withdraw, such as people who hate shopping malls or theme parks.

Intellectual OE is what is traditionally thought of as gifted. This is a drive to find answers, gather information or understand systems. It comes from a profound need to seek understanding and truth, to gain knowledge, and to analyze and synthesize (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1979, 1991). The person with intellectual OE has a very fast mind and is able to grasp ideas quickly. She may feel impatient with the pace of others, and voice frustration and criticism. A gifted person who doesn’t know she is gifted will expect others to keep up and cannot understand why they don’t, which can cause conflict at school, work, and with family and friends (Kroon, 2009).

Imaginational OE is most identified with creativity. People with Imaginational OE have a rich fantasy life, enjoy “make-believe,” use metaphor, have a high capacity for inventiveness, and experience vivid dreams. They may be daydreamers, writers, artists, or actors. A child with imaginational OE will find it hard to focus and stay interested in a class that is rigidly academic and non-creative. She may daydream or draw pictures as a way of tolerating this sort of environment, but then run the risk of falling behind. If not in the right environment, the adult with imaginational OE may find the workplace stifling, demoralizing, and ultimately depressing.

Those with Emotional OE experience feelings intensely. There are extremes of complex emotions, high level of empathy, and emotional sensitivity. They tune into others’ feelings and care a great deal about animals. Those with Emotional OE are often told that they are too sensitive or over-reactive. This trait is more likely pathologized than the others.

Recognizing the intensities, sensitivities and excitabilities of the gifted is key to a successful outcome in therapy. Helping clients understand that these qualities are not flaws, but fundamental aspects of themselves, goes a long way towards fostering self-acceptance and finding healthy ways to care for the self.

References: