

Toxic Giftedness

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11 Jan 2023

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ABSTRACT Toxic giftedness is giftedness that is used for negative and even harmful ends. The field of giftedness has not been quick to recognize the importance to society of toxic giftedness, and its responsibility to combat it. This article defines the concept of toxic giftedness. Then it discusses two manifestations of toxic giftedness: gifted toxic leadership and gifted toxic followership. Toxic leaders and toxic followers are of different kinds. Some toxic leaders intend to do harm; others do so inadvertently. Toxic followers look out for their own interests at the expense of others' interests. They may be oblivious, ingratiators, loyalists, or True Believers. Educators of the gifted have a responsibility in current times to do more to combat toxic giftedness and to do whatever they can to ensure that giftedness is used in ways to make the world better, not worse.

KEYWORDS dark creativity; giftedness; leadership; pseudo-transformational giftedness; toxic giftedness

It's time to talk about toxic giftedness. Actually, it is past time. According to the dictionary, something that is *toxic* is "poisonous" or "very harmful or unpleasant in a pervasive or insidious way" (Oxford Languages, n.d.). Many people like to think of youth with demonstrable gifts and talents as a positive for the world. Why would schools have programs for the gifted if not to propagate positive behavior? But giftedness is much more of a mixed bag than we might wish to admit. And in today's world, we cannot ignore the negative side while we celebrate the positive side.

The nature of toxicity

The field of giftedness has been slow to recognize the importance to society of toxic giftedness as well as society's responsibility to combat it. The world is experiencing it as this essay is being written: a war in Ukraine initiated by a gifted but toxic and possibly mentally unbalanced leader; global climate change being exacerbated by toxically gifted individuals smart enough to be chosen to lead their countries; leaders talking about combating climate change, air pollution, hunger, and corruption while doing little to reduce them. We all have lived with a pandemic that many world leaders worsened by inaction and sometimes counterproductive actions that made the pandemic worse.

This essay examines the concept of toxic giftedness as well as of gifted toxic leadership. It then discusses the toxic followership that enables and supports the toxic leadership. Toxic followers look out for their own interests at the expense of the interests of others. They may be oblivious to what is going on, or they may be ingratiators, or they may be loyalists, or even True Believers. Some toxic followers intentionally do harm; others cause harm but inadvertently.

Educators of the gifted have a responsibility in current times to do more—much more—to combat toxic giftedness than they are now doing. In many instances, they are

now doing exactly nothing. In some cases, such as for educators or others who remove books from libraries that they find politically or ideologically objectionable, they have turned toxic themselves, although probably not toxically gifted. Educators of the gifted need to do whatever it takes to ensure, to the extent possible, that giftedness is used in ways to create a better, not a worse world. These educators need to think about what they mean by giftedness, not only as a positive attribute but also potentially as a negative one.

Toxic giftedness is a type of giftedness. There are many ways of defining giftedness (see essays in Sternberg & Ambrose, 2021). For the purposes of this article, giftedness is defined in terms of Sternberg and Zhang's (1995) pentagonal theory of giftedness. According to this theory, people are gifted if they (a) excel in some way, (b) are relatively rare in the way they excel, (c) can demonstrate their excellence in some way, (d) are productive in demonstrating this giftedness—that is, they consistently produce in a way that shows the gifts, and (e) are valued by some group or groups for the excellence they show.

Being gifted, I suggest, is not, in and of itself, a positive thing. It can be positive (formulating a vaccine against COVID-19), largely neutral (founding a high-IQ society), or negative (letting people die of COVID-19 in the hope of leveraging the appeal to “freedom” to advance one's prospects for reelection or advancement). If you, as the reader, disagree about my choice of individuals or types of individuals about whom I have concerns, or about their work, make your own substitutions. There are plenty of examples to go around. The point remains that giftedness can be deployed in ways that only can be described as, literally, toxic—that is, causing great harm and possibly death. Simply developing giftedness provides no protection whatsoever against the giftedness that is developed in education eventually being used for baleful ends.

Some might argue about the wisdom of labeling someone whose thought or behavior is toxic as “gifted.” But any field needs to recognize that the characteristics it focuses on can be applied in a negative, not just a positive way. The field of creativity already has come to such a reckoning.

For many years, the focus was on *creativity* as a positive. Books and articles on creativity often viewed it as largely and perhaps essentially as a positive construct (see, e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Sternberg, 1988). But creativity has a dark, negative side as well as a positive one (Cropley et al., 2010; James et al., 1999; James & Taylor, 2010; Sternberg, 2010, 2021a). Researchers on creativity have recognized this fact, and as a result, have distinguished the positive and negative sides of creativity, recognizing that creativity can be a force for good or for bad.

Giftedness is the same as creativity. Successes have been viewed as the norm and failures as departures from that norm. But what, exactly, constitutes success? In the Terman (1925) studies, based on Terman's (1916) Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test, a failure was someone who was gifted but did not succeed in achieving at a high level: Perhaps they could have gone to college but didn't, or they won too few awards, or they made a mess of their life. But those “failures” are not necessarily the ones we

should worry about. The ones we should worry about more are people whom society might look at as failed but who try to reshape society to view their toxicity as a success. These are the gifted people who are truly a menace—the ones who exhibit toxic or “dark” giftedness, analogous to dark creativity (Sternberg, 2022c).

Their toxicity does not necessarily emanate from dark uses of creativity. It could emanate as well from dark uses of intelligence. Facebook’s very complex analytical algorithms to maximize clicks and maximize its profits, regardless of harm done to individual users, no doubt required very complex knowledge and analytical skills to construct. So did the formulations for cigarettes that addicted people to nicotine, as did the atomic bombs that were created to attack Hiroshima and Nagasaki (as well as future targets).

If we do not acknowledge that giftedness can be not only inert—underutilized or not utilized at all—but also be utilized for toxic ends, we will be developing children’s knowledge and skills oblivious to the harm as well as the good that developed knowledge and skills can do. That might have worked in some world in the past, although perhaps not. But it does not spell success for the world we live in or our children will live in.

There are many life trajectories that can lead gifted people in one direction or another (Ambrose, 2008, 2015). Some of those directions lead to positive transformational change. Others lead to small changes in the world. But still others lead to toxicity.

Examples of positivity, neutrality, and negativity and its descent into toxicity

Briefly consider the term “giftedness” as it applies to four individuals who have been highly positively gifted—who even could be described as transformationally gifted (Sternberg, 2020a, 2020b; Sternberg et al., 2021): Nelson Mandela, Mohandas Gandhi, Marie Curie, and Greta Thunberg. All of these individuals, as well as others mentioned in this article, have met the five criteria of the pentagonal model of giftedness described above. They all excelled and demonstrated how they excelled, just not necessarily in prosocial ways. We do not really know for sure any of their IQs. Do we care? At least at the adult level, an individual’s IQ probably is not determinative, at least in most instances, of whether they are labeled “gifted.”

In discussing eminent figures in the past and present, one inevitably finds that different people have different takes on them. For example, a reviewer of this article seems to have had a less positive view of the contributions of Nelson Mandela than I present in this article. Although I document the contributions, I recognize that others might see these and almost any other historic figures in a different light. Even Abraham Lincoln, recently rated by presidential historians as the best president in the history of the United States (C-Span, 2021), has received much less than positive reviews from

some (see www.trivia-library.com). My goal in writing this essay is not to focus on extolling or condemning particular individuals, but rather, to elucidate the construct of toxic giftedness and compare it to positive and even transformational giftedness, the kind that makes the world a better place (Sternberg, 2020a, 2020b; Sternberg et al., 2021).

Nelson Mandela transformed South Africa from an Apartheid state into a free one (Blakemore, 2020). That was exceedingly hard to do. It required all kinds of gifts of cognitive, social, and emotional intelligence, as well as sheer courage, itself a form of giftedness (Sternberg, 2022b). Mohandas Gandhi was responsible, perhaps more than anyone else, for freeing India from the yoke of colonialism (Blakemore, 2019). His philosophy of nonviolence has been picked up around the world and was instrumental in some of the “color revolutions” in Eastern Europe (short-lived though their results sometimes may seem to have been). He must have been exceptionally gifted and courageous to have accomplished something no one had before. Marie Curie earned two Nobel Prizes, one in physics for her study of spontaneous radiation and another in chemistry for her work on radioactivity (Curie, 2001; Quinn, 1996). How much more needs to be said about her gifts? Greta Thunberg, as a teenager with autism, started a youth movement to combat global climate change that has spread around the world (Leonard, 2020; Part, 2019; Thunberg, 2019). She has spoken forcefully and eloquently at many world conferences on global warming. She, too, has done something truly unique. Those are the easy cases in which to recognize giftedness.

Now consider, in contrast, Ronald Hoeflin. You may or may not have heard of him (en-academic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/1670203). He is the Founder of the Mega Society, which requires an IQ of 190 (with a frequency of 1 in 1 million people) for membership. (A list of at least some related societies can be found here: miyaguchi.4sigma.org/BloodyHistory/history.html#Prometheus). Needless to say, the Mega Society is a small society. Not all the societies are so exclusive. The Prometheus Society, also founded by Hoeflin, requires an IQ merely in the 99.997th percentile—1 in 30,000. And Mensa requires only an IQ in the 98th percentile, for those who just don’t make the cut into the more elite societies.

Presumably, Hoeflin is a member himself of some or perhaps all of the high-IQ societies he has founded. You, the reader, can decide for yourself whether membership in a high-IQ society, at least as an adult, is sufficient for a label of “gifted.” Perhaps it is “neutrally gifted”? If one’s major contribution to the world were to be founding or joining such a society, does that qualify? You decide! Some might classify such membership as illustrative of “inert giftedness”—which is giftedness in personal attributes that has not been realized in interactions with others and the world (see Sternberg et al., 2021), but we each have our own view.

Now let’s consider Adolf Hitler, perhaps the ultimate to date in toxic giftedness, although Vladimir Putin seems to be trying to give Hitler a run for his money (If Putin uses nuclear weapons in Ukraine or elsewhere, he may “out-Hitler” Hitler). The following characterization is largely drawn from a description by the National WWII

Museum (www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/how-did-hitler-happen; see also Longerich, 2019; Toland, 1992). Was he gifted?

Adolf Hitler was the chancellor of Germany and its supreme source of power from 1933 until 1945, at which point he apparently committed suicide. As the nation's top leader (Führer), he transformed the nation into one that was subservient, often blindly, to his will. As in any dictatorship, those who rejected the policies of the governing Nazi Party placed themselves in grave danger, ranging from warnings to imprisonment—often in a concentration camp—to torture, or forced participation in obscene and totally unethical medical “experiments,” to death in a mass genocide.

Those who were executed were viewed as unworthy of living, and included, among other groups, Jews, Romani (sometimes called Roma) people, homosexual people, and Jehovah's Witnesses. People who helped those who were targeted for death placed themselves at extreme risk. The homicidal nature of the regime is difficult to overstate. The figure most often cited is the slaughter of six million Jews. But that number is only a beginning. In addition, there were approximately seven million Soviet citizens who died, three million Soviet prisoners of war, 1.8 million non-Jewish Polish civilians, as many as a quarter of a million people with disabilities, between a quarter- and a half-million Romani people (Holocaust Encyclopedia, n.d.). Well, you get the idea. Those figures do not include people who died in World War II who were members of none of these groups, including soldiers and civilians alike.

However it may have appeared at the time, Hitler achieved power in a very organized and systematic fashion. After World War I, many Germans were humiliated by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. The Weimar Republic was required to pay 132 billion gold marks (\$269 billion in today's dollars) in war damages and reparations. Germany gave up territory and the German military was forced to reduce its size and scope substantially. The German government seemed, at least to some, to dither.

Adolf Hitler presented what he described as a new vision for Germany. The new Germany would be ruled by an authoritarian leader, a Führer. All German citizens would serve the State. Individual rights would be downscaled in favor of service to the State. Hitler blamed Jews and other “non-Aryans” for Germany's woes—there always is a scapegoat or multiple scapegoats, of course. And the rest is history. Hitler was able to convince many in the government and among the German people to bend to his will. His personality structure is not unfamiliar to those in the world approaching the mid-21st century. Today, there are authoritarian figures in many countries, either in power or vying for power—Brazil, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Mexico, Poland, Hungary, Nicaragua, Russia, China, Turkmenistan, Eritrea, Libya, Zimbabwe, Laos, Belarus, Venezuela, and many other countries (freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores). Perhaps one would include even the United States, if one considers recent and future possible governments. People's willingness to be subservient to toxic leaders has not changed much from the times of World War II. Although there was a period of hope after the fall of Communism, that period has been ending, and democracy has been in decline throughout much of the world (Freedom House, 2021).

Table 1 lists characteristics of toxic leaders based on the work of Lipman-Blumen (2006), Kellerman (2004), and Sternberg (2019b). Lipman-Blumen lists characteristics of toxic leaders; Kellerman, types of “bad” leaders; and Sternberg, characteristics of “foolish” leaders who enhance themselves at the expense of their followers. Paulhus and Williams (2002) list characteristics of dark-triad personalities, including of leaders. The gifted ones are the ones who, in showing the characteristics outlined by Sternberg and Zhang (1995), often have the most and longest-term influence over not only their devoted followers, but also over those who are forced to follow them unwillingly.

Of course, we can write off the toxic world leaders and aspiring world leaders as not gifted. But how far can we push this reasoning? It probably is less than one in a million people, or one of a very large number, who can engineer all of the different things that need to be done in a country of many millions to establish an autocracy with oneself at the helm. There could be, in theory, an analogue to an ultra-high-IQ society, except for those who have exceptionally high levels of skills for taking over a country. Applebaum (2021) has made some suggestions for such a list.

Toxic giftedness does not apply just to governmental takeovers, however. Consider an instance that is perhaps closer to home, at least in the present day. It is an instance that is, in some ways, more insidious in the field of technology.

Consider the current CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg (Frenkel & Kang, 2021; Mezrich, 2010). To become CEO of Facebook, a corporation that reached a market capitalization of over \$1 trillion in June 2021 (Rodriguez, 2021), is no mean feat (The value, as I am writing, is lower because of a spate of negative publicity). If such an achievement does not represent giftedness in the acquisition of (often hidden) power, what achievement does? For those who prefer more academic credentials, please keep in mind that Zuckerberg was admitted to Harvard University, although he dropped out in 2005, and was the Commencement speaker at Harvard in 2017.

Table 1. Characteristics of toxic leaders.
Lipman-Blumen (1986)

- Feed the illusions of their followers
- Impair the ability of their followers to act independently
- Manipulate the deepest needs and fears of their followers
- Deceive their followers and deliberately misdiagnose problems
- Undermine institutions, norms, rules, processes
- Build totalitarian regimes

- Set their constituents against one another
- Train followers to scapegoat, shun, hate others
- Mistreat the weakest and bestow more power on the powerful
- Utilize scarce resources for personal gain
- Ignore the plight of their followers in the aftermath of crises
- Disregard or support incompetence, cronyism, and corruption
- Act with incompetence that injures their followers and the organizations for which they are responsible

Kellerman (2004)

- Incompetent—are not up to the demands of the job
- Rigid—lack flexibility in the face of new information and demands
- Intemperate—lacking in self-control and moderation in behavior
- Callous—show cold disregard of others
- Corrupt—act dishonestly for personal gain
- Insular—unwilling to countenance new and unfamiliar ideas
- Evil—extremely immoral; wicked; actively promoting unethical behavior

Sternberg (2019b)

- Unrealistically optimistic—believe that if an idea is theirs, it must be good
- Egocentric—it's all about them
- Falsely omniscient—believe they know everything so do not have consult experts or anyone else
- Falsely omnipotent—believe they are all-powerful
- Falsely invulnerable—believe that they can act with impunity
- Ethical disengagement—believe that ethical precepts only apply to suckers
- Sunk-cost fallacy—will not admit mistakes, so keep doubling down even after what they have done has failed

Paulhus and Williams (2002)

- Narcissism—sense of entitlement, lack of empathy, need for adulation
- Machiavellianism—amorality, manipulateness, and unscrupulousness in the attainment and maintenance of power
- Psychopathy—inability to establish meaningful personal relationships, extreme egocentricity, lack of shame or remorse, inability to love, grandiose sense of self-worth, pathological lying

In the first quarter of 2022, Facebook had 2.9 billion users (www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide). Certainly, someone who can build a business that utterly dominates the social-media world can be viewed as gifted. By comparison, Twitter, a major social-media platform, had 396 million users in the same quarter that Facebook had almost 3 billion. Zuckerberg is an historical phenomenon whose ability to put people in touch with each other is unrivaled in world history.

Yet, all is not well with Facebook or the management of it, as anyone who reads any media at all would know in 2022, when this article is being produced. Milbank (2022) has referred, metaphorically, to Facebook as a “melanoma” on the body politic, for, among other things, its apparently unapologetic and active role in spreading lies that fomented the January 6, 2020, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol Building. The so-called “Facebook Papers,” memoranda from within Facebook, have revealed some very ugly truths about Facebook (Chappell, 2021; Lima, 2021):

1. What the CEO claimed publicly was often at variance with what Facebook’s research showed. Either the CEO lied or he was ignorant of what his own company was doing, neither of which one presumably would expect from a CEO.
2. Before the January 6, 2020, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., Facebook had discarded many of the procedures it previously had put into place to guard it against being used for incitements to violence.
3. In much of the world, Facebook hardly monitors activity.
4. Given the choice between maximum engagement of users and user safety, Facebook repeatedly chose maximum engagement at the expense of safety in order to maximize profits.
5. Facebook willfully put into place procedures that gave strong emotions, such as anger, five times the weight of likes, thereby promoting hateful and other highly emotional content.

6. The CEO was personally responsible for capitulating to demands of the Vietnamese government for identifying information of users, which in turn led to a crackdown on dissent.

If one has any doubt about the motivation,

“Facebook for three years systematically amped up some of the worst of its platform, making it more prominent in users’ feeds and spreading it to a much wider audience. The power of the algorithmic promotion undermined the efforts of Facebook’s content moderators and integrity teams, who were fighting an uphill battle against toxic and harmful content.” (Merrill & Oremus, 2021)

Moreover, Facebook lied in claiming that the same rules applied to everyone. In fact, an elite group of people had a set of different rules all their own, which enabled them to spread even more toxic content that others would not have been allowed to spread (Horwitz, 2021).

Of course, people can interpret the Facebook Papers in various ways. But what the papers show is that (a) many of Facebook’s own employees put their jobs at risk by warning the company of the negative effects of what they were doing and (b) the warnings largely went unheeded (Chappell, 2021). For Facebook, the unethical behavior was not a lapse; it was and likely still is part of Facebook’s business model (Lauer, 2021). The harm is, according to at least one columnist, indisputable (Tharoor, 2021). “History will not judge us kindly,” as one Facebook staffer wrote (LaFrance, 2021). Perhaps not totally surprisingly, the CEO of Facebook criticized not Facebook, but the reports on its behavior (Manfredi, 2021).

The Facebook story is of particular interest because the company is so tightly controlled by one man, the CEO (Farrell et al., 2018; Wagner, 2019). It comes as close to being a one-man show as any public corporation. At this point, at least some of the truly bad things it has done have become public. At the same time, one has seen, in the United States and in many other countries, rage increase and civil behavior decrease. Is one motivation for this rage the enrichment of one individual, one corporation, and one set of stockholders? It is quite possible.

Facebook’s response to the many trenchant criticisms leveled against it has been to deny them—and also to change the name of the holding company to “Meta.” This is an old but rather transparent maneuver. For example, WorldCom, facing bankruptcy and disgrace, changed its name to MCI.

As of December 2021, Facebook had 71,970 employees (www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=how+many+employees+does+facebook+have%3F). Some of these have become whistleblowers, but not many. A job at Facebook is a premium job (www.comparably.com/companies/facebook/salaries): The median compensation is \$149,718, with the mean compensation just slightly lower. Compensation

varies widely by department. For example, in the Communications Department, the average is \$221,000, but in operations, which keep things going, the average salary is only \$72,000. It is easy to see why employees would not be in a hurry to leave. It is hard to get hired, even for graduates of elite universities, and the web has sites on things one can do to land a job at Facebook (e.g., career karma.com/blog/how-to-get-a-job-at-facebook).

The purpose of the story about Facebook is not merely to single out Facebook. Looking at the history of America (and almost certainly, any other country), one can find corporate or other settings in which the products have been physically or psychologically toxic to some degree, at the same time that, in selected cases, they also did some good. People, including ones who likely would have been seen as “gifted” in childhood, have taken jobs in administration, marketing, and sales at cigarette companies; purveyors of weapons of mass destruction; gun companies that produce the guns that kill school children; oil and gas companies that have polluted the air and contributed to global warming; and on and on. People working at almost any of these companies could and have touted the benefits of their work. Certainly, it is not the goal of this article to pass judgment on each job anyone could take. Many, if not most of the companies have done good things as well as not so good things. I gave the example of Facebook because its corporate irresponsibility has been so brazen; but there are other companies that could compete, such as the cigarette companies that hid the physical damage their products did when they knew that their products were unsafe, or the car companies that allowed unsafe cars on the road. The question is not really why people take such jobs—they generally pay well and offer at least the chance of a secure livelihood—but why do people, even people who are gifted or talented, allow their gifts and talents to be co-opted by leaders who are toxic and who are destructive not only to humanity, but also to other life on the planet?

It may seem odd to refer to Hitler, Putin, or any other toxic leader as “gifted,” but these leaders do have a gift for gaining and maintaining control, albeit a toxic gift. Not all gifts are positive. Some are toxic (see Sternberg, 2018, 2019b). Many of us have gotten gifts that were, at best, indifferent, such as a tie or a pair of earrings we did not like. Some of us have gotten gifts that were truly baneful. On June 24, 1993, a Yale computer-science professor, David Gelernter, opened a package containing one such gift. The gift exploded upon being opened and left him permanently injured. Unfortunately, the gift was from a mentally ill man, Ted Kaczynski, who came to be called the “Unabomber.” Gifts and giftedness can be positive or negative. Regardless of what their intrinsic properties are, they can be deployed in positive or negative ways. For example, is the “gift” of nuclear power good or bad? It depends on what it is used for, and also, the possible ways in which it can be so horribly misused.

People who are toxic are at the polar opposite end of being wise (Sternberg, 2018, 2019b). They use their gifts not to create a better world, but to create a worse and possibly dreadful one.

One might argue that those I call “toxically gifted” are not dispositionally gifted, but rather merely people who have taken advantage of the situations in which they have found themselves. But giftedness can be situational (Sternberg, 2022a), as is often the case with courage (Sternberg, 2022b). It does not have to be dispositional, and it certainly does not have to be something with which one is born. People can be toxically gifted, but only with respect to specific domains.

The message of this discussion is that giftedness can take many forms, not just in terms of the domains or fields in which people work (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), but also in terms of its consequences. Consequences matter. Giftedness is not only positive. What makes it positive or not is in how it is deployed—positively, neutrally, negatively, and even toxically. The field ignores consequences at the world’s peril. We must no longer bury our heads in the sand. For example, in talking about gifted U.S. presidents, we cannot talk only about the George Washington’s and Abraham Lincoln’s, who used their gifts to make the country better, without talking about the Andrew Johnson’s and James Buchanan’s, who used their gifts to make the country worse.

Kinds of toxic giftedness

Consider in more detail the kinds of toxic giftedness. Those whose giftedness turns toxic fall into two broad camps: toxic leaders and toxic followers. Toxic leaders, described above, may be leaders in any field, not just politics, who try to steer others to benefit the toxic leader and accomplish the toxic leaders’ poisonous agenda. Toxic followers figure out how to benefit themselves by following toxic leaders. The followers may do so by ingratiation, demonstrations of loyalty, or even by true belief in the agenda of the toxic leader. To some extent, those who succeed in any system figure out how to follow the system and maximize their personal benefits. The ones who do that best—sometimes, because they are good grade-getters or testers—are, in effect, often gifted followers of whatever the dominant system is.

We wish our gifted to become the leaders of tomorrow. But what if they become toxic leaders? Who are toxic leaders and why do people follow them? Let us consider these concepts now in more detail.

Toxic leadership

Toxic leaders, on balance, harm their followers. Leaders are both toxic and gifted when, following the Sternberg-Zhang (1995) definition, they (a) excel in getting people to follow them, often through charisma and false appeals of populism, and in exerting power; (b) are rare in their ability to get people to follow them down a destructive path (e.g., Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, and regrettably, many contemporary leaders); (c) demonstrate their power through destructive means, such as destroying democracy or

imprisoning and killing political prisoners; and (d) are valued by their followers, often through blind loyalty.

The toxic leaders are a loss for the people or organization they lead (e.g., Blatnik, 2021; Schmidt, 2008; Singh et al., 2018). What are the characteristics of what I am here calling “gifted” toxic leaders, and why do many people, even very bright people, follow them? Certainly, there are still toxic leaders who install themselves through a coup-d’état. But so many of them just get themselves elected, and then, sooner or later, arrange to stay in power indefinitely. Wherever you live, it could happen there, as it has in so many places.

Toxic leaders as pseudo-transformational

Scholars of leadership have written about pseudo-transformational leaders—leaders who seek to give the appearance of being positively transformational and changing things for the better, when in fact their only interest is in themselves and their cronies (Bass, 1998; Bass et al., 1996; Bass & Riggio, 2006). There is also a theory of the concept of transformation as applied to the pseudo-transformationally gifted (see Sternberg et al., 2021). The pseudo-transformationally gifted deploy their giftedness toward destructive ends, either directed at just themselves, just at others, or both at themselves and at others.

Characteristics of toxic leaders

The scholar who has done the most research on the characteristics of toxic leaders is Jean Lipman-Blumen (2006). Consider characteristics of toxic leaders. You can choose your toxic leader: There are plenty to choose from. According to Lipman-Blumen, toxic leaders have certain characteristics, and those who are gifted leaders are exceptionally effective at propagating their toxicity:

First, toxic leaders feed their followers’ illusions and even help to create those illusions. For example, a politician who lost an election might create the illusion that they won it. If they are gifted, they might convince their followers of it as well, despite all objective evidence to the contrary.

Second, toxic leaders reduce or eliminate their followers’ ability to act on their own—independently without the influence of the leader. These leaders make sure that whatever their followers do is what the toxic leaders want them to do. Those who are not completely obedient—who try to assert independence—are punished or ousted from positions of influence. This is what happens to politicians who represent a political party that becomes a cult. Those who do not show complete obeisance to the leader are sidelined or ousted.

Third, toxic leaders exert their influence, in part, by appealing to, and often by manipulating, their followers’ deeply felt and sometimes not even conscious needs and fears. The leaders often are utterly unscrupulous. Whether the fears are of foreigners,

people of diverse religions, people of other socially defined races or ethnicities, people who live in different areas—nothing is off-limits if a toxic leader is seeking to appeal to people’s basest instincts. Toxically gifted leaders figure out what their followers’ deepest needs and fears are, and how to manipulate those followers.

Fourth, toxic leaders lie without compunction and to advance their own personal agendas. The leaders often show the dark triad of psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism. Many of us lie, but we don’t have a gift for it. It takes a truly gifted liar in a position of leadership, for example, president of a country, to tell over 30,000 lies during a presidency (Kessler et al., 2021) —most of them easily disconfirmable—and not only maintain the support of their base, but also, if anything, to enhance the support of that base. We might dismiss such a person as not worthy of any further consideration. On the contrary, we should recognize that they have a gift, albeit a toxic one, that very few people in history have had.

Fifth, toxic leaders misdiagnose problems for their own benefit. Misdiagnosing a problem means that one’s goal is not to solve the problem, but rather, to turn its continued existence to one’s benefit. Scapegoating members of national, religious, ethnic, or racial groups as causes of problems in a country as the source of the country’s problems is an old kind of misdiagnosis, going back to ancient times. Yet, oddly, it still works. Politicians regularly use scapegoating as a way to solidify their support within a base of people who feel threatened by the ways the world is changing that they see as detrimental to themselves.

Sixth, toxically gifted leaders set one group against another. They set the strong against the weak and often make the strong feel victimized. The leaders specialize in nursing hatred and resentment. Unwilling to blame themselves, they seek others to blame, which is where the scapegoats come in. The genocide in Rwanda was about scapegoating, as was the genocide in Burundi, just with the groups (Hutus and Tutsis) reversed. It takes a toxic gift on the part of leaders to convince teachers to kill their students and members of families to kill people in their families who are members of a different ethnic group (see Sternberg, 2003; Sternberg & Sternberg, 2008).

Seventh, toxically gifted leaders undermine institutions, norms that exist within a nation, and even the laws of those nations. The leaders often build totalitarian nations. Adolf Hitler did it and succeeded; Benito Mussolini and Joseph Stalin both did it. It is happening right now in the world. Poland and Hungary have both become illiberal and Brazil was close until the recent election. Some believe that the United States has flirted or is flirting with one or more individuals who are managing, at some level, to overturn two-and-a-half centuries of quasi-democracy and turn the country into an autocracy (Ingraham, 2020). And countries that become autocratic almost inevitably become more corrupt (Hollyer & Wantchekon, 2011).

A toxically *gifted* leader is one who is toxic and extremely successful in accomplishing their toxic agenda. Some toxic leaders are bad but are quickly dispatched. They are anything but gifted. They are voted out of office, fired, dethroned, imprisoned, murdered. Or they may stay in office but do only minor amounts of harm. The gifted

toxic leaders are the ones who are truly poisonous—who succeed in doing great damage over a period of time to their organization and the world.

Kellerman (2004) has also proposed an analysis of various kinds of toxic, or simply bad leaders, suggesting that they fall into one or more of seven categories: (a) incompetent, (b) rigid, (c) intemperate, (d) callous, (e) corrupt, (f) insular, and (g) evil.

It might seem self-contradictory that someone could be both gifted and incompetent. Yet, the contradiction that would seem to be apparent misses the point. The toxic leader is not gifted in doing an excellent, good, or even satisfactory job in the leadership position. Rather, they are gifted in subverting the leadership position into what they wish it to be to advance their own particular brand of toxicity. Their gift is in the extremely high level of their toxicity. They may be incompetent, or intemperate, or callous, or whatever. But these attributes are orthogonal to what they care about and develop in themselves as leaders. What they care about is how to use their position to advance their own ends. They will change things, but not for the better—at least, not for most others.

Toxically gifted followers

Followers can be of many different kinds. Toxically gifted followers use their followership to advance their own interests without regard to the interests of others; they usually harm other people’s interests (e.g., Farnell, 2021; Offerman, 2004; Thomas et al., 2016). The followers fall into one of three categories. Although this is my own categorization, it relates to the categorizations of others (such as Offerman, 2004):

Oblivious followers

The oblivious are gifted in something but not in their connection with society. Society may be in decline, but they care little or not at all so long as they can get their work done. They follow whoever leads in the hope of being left alone. By failing to participate actively, they tacitly advance the interests of leaders and sometimes toxic leaders. They are a bit, at least metaphorically, like the talented musicians on the Titanic who tried to produce perfect music while the ship sank, with them on it. Many Germans were aware of what Hitler was doing; they chose to remain oblivious (Ezard, 2001).

Ingratiators

The ingratiation is particularly high in emotional intelligence (Rivers et al., 2020) and social intelligence (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 2020). They use their emotional and social intelligence to appeal to others’ insecurity, vanity, or simple desire for followers.

One might think at first thought that it is only the leaders who do the damage, but even a cursory analysis of any toxic leader will reveal that the followers do most of the actual damage. Adolf Hitler did not personally murder most, if any members of targeted populations. Many of the people who committed the murderous acts were merely mindless followers. But Hitler's close henchmen were gifted followers; they were able to use Hitler's genocidal doctrine for their own toxic purposes (Ezard, 2001). Similarly, in the United States or anywhere else, toxic leaders set the tone, but they recruit toxically gifted followers to be on their staff or to run for positions in government. Machiavelli's, 2021 treatise, *The Prince*, covers in detail the principles of ingratiation, and shows that ingratiation is nothing at all new in followers of toxic leaders. Machiavelli was himself an ingratiator. For better or worse, ingratiation often is successful (Jones, 1964). The followers then pretend to be leaders but fall in line behind the toxically gifted leader. Their function is to advance the agenda of someone else in an effective and efficient way.

Loyalists

Loyalists may or may not be ingratiators, but their gift is in following directions, explicit or implicit, to the letter. A recent U.S. president, in his role as president, demanded loyalty and even said "I need loyalty" to the then FBI director (Kruse, 2018). Loyalists may be individuals of very high IQ: Obtaining a high IQ on a test is, in part, a matter of following to the letter not only the directions of the test, but the directions of the socializers in one's upbringing. People with high IQs often are very good at figuring out and then following the rules of a system. The loyalists are loyal to the system but, most of all, make the system work for them. In many kinds of systems, loyalists are the ones who advance the furthest because they are the best at playing by the existing rules.

True Believers

True Believers are, in a sense, the most dangerous of the followers (Belew, 2019; Ebner, 2021; Hoffer, 2010). True Believers believe devoutly in a leader without the use of adequate critical thinking to justify their belief. Their reasoning is somewhat predictable and even can be simulated (Abelson & Carroll, 1965). And they may become fanatical in following the orders of the toxic leader.

There may be many True Believers, but most are not gifted. The gifted ones are the ones of influence, the ones who often seek converts and may threaten those who do not convert. Years ago, most of the Crusaders were merely followers, but at least some of their leaders may have truly believed that they were following the mission of Christ. Today, autocrats are taking over and have taken over governments throughout the world. They do not do it alone. They need and always have a coterie of True Believers ready to execute the autocrat's or potential autocrat's will. The gifted True Believers

are the ones who follow so effectively that they enable the autocrat to obtain and then stay in power. Their gifts are unfortunate, because they so often make life miserable for many of those who are stuck with the autocrat but wish to be free.

True Believers are not necessarily after power. Richard Wagner, the gifted composer, was a fervent anti-Semite and German ultra-nationalist. He was a leader in music who helped to create the musical *Zeitgeist*; but, in his essays, he followed that part of the existing *Zeitgeist* that was anti-Semitic. His essays against Jews were numerous and vitriolic; he is alleged to have been Hitler's favorite composer (Burton-Hill, 2014). Ezra Pound, the notable poet, was also blatantly anti-Semitic (Ellison, 1999). Indeed, if one were to go back in time, and not even very far, one would find many gifted individuals who had great antipathy for Jews, Blacks, Chinese or Japanese people, homosexual people, and members of many other groups. Some of them kept silent; others were vocal and eager to win converts. We all know that they still are around today. They did not necessarily seek to be leaders of a movement against such people. But they were True Believers. They were eager to have others join their movement.

In conclusion

Those in the field of giftedness tend, perhaps overwhelmingly, to present giftedness in a positive light. This is understandable. First, gifted people are often those who make the world a different and better place. Where would be today in the world without the contributions of great artists, writers, musicians, scientists, and statesmen? Second, gifted children, given no special services, may become bored and alienated. Further, they may fail to make the contribution they had it in them to make because adults failed them. Third, gifted education is constantly under threat. In times of pullbacks for lack of finances, gifted education is often one of the first things to go. And many societies, including the United States, often put first the needs of those who have fallen behind; people may even believe that the gifted are the last ones to need special services. They believe that if any students can look after themselves, it is the gifted ones. Finally, those of us in the field often have studied it extensively, and truly believe that we have something to offer gifted children that regular programming in school lacks.

Yet, we in the gifted field, like those in the creativity field who have studied dark creativity, need to have a reckoning with the dark side of giftedness. Any talent can be used for good or bad purposes, or in ways that, while positive for some, are negative for others. Some scholars of creativity have been arguing that we need to teach not just for creativity, but rather for positive creativity (Sternberg & Chowkase, 2021; Sternberg & Karami, 2021) or even transformational creativity (Sternberg, 2021b), which is positive creativity that transforms the world into a better place. So, we might think in the gifted field that just developing gifts is not enough. Graduates of the most elite schools in the United States and elsewhere have perhaps too often gone on

to be toxically gifted leaders and followers. Teaching students advanced mathematics, science, or anything else will not guarantee or, perhaps even help students to use their gifts for good purposes.

In one of the universities in which I once taught, at one point in time, the plurality of students went on to jobs in the financial industry, where some of them likely manipulated money for those who had the money to invest in their elite funds. They made a rich living doing so. Others have gone to become toxic politicians or consultants who, for example, helped Purdue Pharma create the sales campaigns that resulted in many thousands, if not millions of people becoming addicted to opioids. What is arguably the top consulting firm in the United States, one that recruits, for the most part, only the most gifted college and university graduates, recently paid a \$573 million settlement for their efforts to promote opioids (BBC News, 2021a). But is that what we are developing giftedness for?

Some teachers of gifted and talented youth might believe it is the job of parents or religious teachers or anyone but themselves to teach students how to *deploy* their giftedness rather than just to develop their giftedness. But if we take on the responsibility to allocate resources to the gifted, should we not also do what we can to allocate resources to teaching students how to positively deploy the gifts they have? There is no reason to believe that the deployment automatically will be positive. Historically, it never has been. Our testing culture has become so focused on test scores and conventional academic achievement that, as the years have gone by, our basal readers—which are where students learn not only how to read but also how to think—have deemphasized teaching for wisdom and instead have increased emphasis on sheer academic content (Sternberg, 2019a).

The Internet and especially social media appear to have created a toxicity in interpersonal interactions that is new to humanity (e.g., Brogunier, 2019). If we look to gifted people to make society a better place, we have to recognize that some are using their gifts to make the world more toxic. Facebook is a case in point. Their own memos show that the company allowed toxicity to flourish in order to maximize engagement and thus profits (Lima, 2021). Will anyone do anything about it? Perhaps, perhaps not. We are a society that investigates a lot and often does little with the results. One is reminded of the innumerable school strategic plans gathering dust in drawers or computer memories. The intentions were good; the follow-up was minimal.

Toxicity, of course, is not limited to the gifted. The world often reacts in a toxic way to people who are gifted. Socrates was forced to drink hemlock. Ignaz Semmelweis discovered the importance for doctors of hand-washing and was ridiculed by others in his own profession. John Snow discovered that cholera was transmitted by contaminated water rather than by “miasma,” a term having something to do with “bad air” that was never well-defined in any case. He, too, went unappreciated by many at the time. The list of gifted scientists and other scholars is a long one. As I write today, a gifted Chinese reporter is close to death in jail in China because she had the reporting skills and courage to report on the cover-up by the Chinese government of the COVID-19

outbreak in Wuhan (Editorial Board, 2021). She is not alone, in China or elsewhere, in being punished for being gifted in courage and telling the truth. In Russia, Alexei Navalny is in prison for being one of very few to have the courage to expose malfeasance in government. His imprisonment came after the Russian government apparently tried to assassinate him (BBC News, 2021b). The United States also has a history of jailing critics, such as those of the Civil Rights movement, like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks. Even science-fiction movies, such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, have had as a theme gifted aliens coming to Earth to help people, only to be killed by the fearful—and toxic Earthlings. Stereotypes about gifted people being strange and possibly threatening have abounded throughout history (see, e.g., Ely, 2010).

Because gifted people often have been treated so poorly and often, in history, elicited a toxic reaction, those who value the gifted—teachers, researchers, administrators, and parents—may be reluctant to label anyone gifted as “toxic.” They may feel that, throughout history, gifted individuals have suffered enough negative labeling without their adding to it. Why risk contributing, even inadvertently, to negative stereotypes about the gifted? But failing to acknowledge that some individuals in any group, whatever that group may be, can become toxic is not a solution to the problem of negative stereotyping. First, there is the matter of truth. People in any group simply can be or become toxic. Second, by admitting to the truth, one only increases one’s credibility in advocating for those of the gifted—hopefully a large majority—who make a positive contribution to the world. Third and finally, a problem, in this case of toxic giftedness, cannot be solved by ignoring it or pretending it does not exist.

Someone has to take responsibility for raising a new generation that will do better than we have done so far. If not educators of gifted and talented youth, then who? We are the ones who take on the responsibility to develop gifts. Why not also take responsibility for ensuring, to the extent we can, that those gifts are used for better and not for worse ends?

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Robert J. Sternberg
Toxic Giftedness
11 Jan 2023

Roeper Review, Volume 45, Issue 1, 2023, Conceptions of Giftedness, Pages 61–73.
<doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2022.2148311>

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