

# Finding Your Balance Between Gifted Verbal and Imaginal Thinking Across the Lifespan

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**ABSTRACT:** *Due to their intensity, complexity, and drive, the gifted and extra intelligent may experience relatively large inner changes across their lifespan, possibly leading to new career ambitions. I have developed tools to make these changes and their possible consequences visible, relating them to my clients' personal experiences. Starting from the differences between verbal and imaginal thinking, I introduce a scattergram to visualize positions and possible changes in the two modes. I then apply Epstein's Cognitive-Experiential Theory (CET) to broaden the concept of verbal versus imaginal thinking to rational versus experiential thinking. The CET frame and wording are very well suited to explain changes in preference and ability to "following the head or the heart" across the lifespan and contribute to finding a new balance between the two.*

**KEYWORDS:** extra intelligence, verbal thinking, visual thinking, imaginal thinking, Cognitive-Experiential Theory

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## Intensity, Complexity, Drive and the Inner Experience of Giftedness

When you are gifted it is almost inevitable to become aware—often quite early in life—that the people around you are different from you in respects that can turn out to be quite bothersome when you want to express your inner self. But to come up with a satisfying analysis for this condition can be difficult.

That is why, ever since I became aware of Mary-Elaine Jacobsen's (1999) book, *The Gifted Adult*, I have been charmed by her explanation that the gifted are different in three fundamental ways: They are quantitatively, qualitatively, and motivationally different; their keywords are Intensity, Complexity, and Drive. As Jacobsen writes:

This is simply how our circuitry is designed. There's no reason to either pat ourselves on the back or fake it,

pretending we are the same as everyone else. . . . We need only know how to make our quantitative, qualitative, and motivational differences work for us rather than against us. (p. 254)

Depending on your environment and personal style of perception, the issue is not only being different, but also being uncommon. That is, few people around you share the fact of being different, and the difference itself can take quite diverse forms. So, how can you, as a gifted person, notice and learn the most effective and agreeable way of being and expressing yourself 24/7?

To me, the inner experience of giftedness is about a process of experiencing complexity, intensity, and drive, noticing one's personal relatively different and uncommon levels of giftedness and finding one's own way of dealing with it, both in relation to oneself and to one's environment. When this experience is perceived consciously, it has great value for its owner.

As a career counselor for the gifted and for extra intelligent people for almost twenty years, I have always considered it my job to help my clients in using these inner experiences of giftedness to their advantage instead of being confused, terrified, and frustrated by them. And of course, initially many do not know that this can rightly be called their inner experience of giftedness.

My main strategy and passion have been to provide words and images for these differences and this uncommonness, in order to make them explicit, understandable in their context, and more manageable. Over the years my tools have evolved, following my own growing knowledge and understanding of the complexities and intensities of giftedness.

This article deals specifically with the consequences of having a preference for verbal or visual thinking processes and how being uncommonly intense, complex, and driven expresses itself in these preferences, shaping one's inner experience of giftedness. It helps to extend the concept of visual thinking, as I will gradually do.

As the preferences often change across the lifespan, how does this impact the inner experience, or conversely, how does a changed inner experience of giftedness indicate a change of preferences? Being aware of one's inner balance between using verbal or visual thinking is very relevant when you are complex, intense, and driven. Conscious awareness of this balance helps to manage the process of change and increases personal effectiveness. I have developed a scattergram to make this balance more visible (see below).

I will introduce Epstein's Cognitive-Experiential Theory (CET) to facilitate understanding the differences between the two ways of thinking, extending them to rational versus experiential thinking and contributing to the management of the inner balance between these two ways of thinking. Due to their extraordinary abilities, I find that many gifted and extra intelligent individuals benefit tremendously from the CET approach, often opening them up to an as of yet

undiscovered or underdeveloped side of themselves, allowing more of their potential and inner experience to shine.

## **Many Forms of Expression**

In her book Jacobsen (1999) describes the characteristics of intensity, complexity, and drive, rather than defining them. This seems quite apt, as the diversity in their expression is so enormous. Some elements from her descriptions are the following:

Intensity is primarily a matter of increased arousal. It is the result of a sensory, neural, and emotional network that is more receptive and more responsive, extending higher, deeper, and farther than that of the average person (p. 258).

Complexity: . . . minds that are qualitatively different in that they rapidly assess, integrate, and employ information from multiple domains—facts or theories, images or symbols, feelings, intuition, and Divine illumination. (p. 267)

Drive is the domain of insatiable curiosity, high standards (perfectionism), perseverance, independence, and self-motivation. (p. 279)

Over the years I have learned to recognize these qualities, and the extent of how true they are in my career coaching clients. In the beginning they seemed quite abstract, but over time the typical patterns became clearer and more recognizable to me. Simultaneously, I had to discover how my opinion of my own patterns of intensity, complexity, and drive needed adjusting over the years as the inner experience of my own giftedness grew more profound. I have explained that process in an earlier article, “Being Gifted, Being Me” (Kuipers, 2019).

Conversely, I learned how these typical characteristics can be used the other way around: When people understand and acknowledge how uncommonly intense, complex, and driven they are, they are ready for the inevitable conclusion that they exhibit typical gifted behavior. Some may accept the label “gifted,” with or without an IQ test. Others want to stay away from what they consider a pigeonhole, but are nevertheless willing to learn more about the typicalities of their behavior and how to apply tips and tricks from the gifted literature. After all, they *have* already experienced that it is not always easy to be uncommonly intense, complex, and driven. That is particularly true for imaginal thinkers.

## **Verbal and Imaginal Thinking**

Over the past fifteen plus years, I have closely collaborated with my colleague Mechel Ensing-Wijn, who became in the course of these years one of the Dutch experts on visual thinking

(“beelddenken” or reframed in English as imaginal thinking, as I will explain below). We spent countless hours together intensely investigating and discussing the differences between verbal thinking and visual thinking, how visual thinkers can have uncommon intelligence and how it operates and much more. As a result, we decided that imaginal thinking was a more inclusive term for what we had observed that our clients were doing, rather than calling it visual thinking.

One of the motivators for this conclusion was that we have hosted for many years now monthly walk-in afternoons, where prospective clients can come to meet us, ask questions freely, obtain information, and so on. Some clients come for Mechel, others come for me, and many find themselves unexpectedly interested in extra intelligence, or in imaginal thinking, while their original reason for coming pertained to the other subject or host. We are thrilled with the diversity of thinking styles and preferences that show themselves in the interaction of our visitors’ styles, with Mechel’s imaginal style or my somewhat more verbal style of gifted communication.

In my book, *Enjoying the Gift of Being Uncommon* (Kuipers, 2011), I have described the concepts of verbal thinking versus imaginal thinking. At the time I was well acquainted with the concepts of Auditory-Sequential versus Visual-Spatial Learner, as introduced by Linda Silverman (2002) in her book *Upside-Down Brilliance*. As I do my coaching with adults, the “learner”/education wording was of limited use for my clients, and it was already my experience that there were often more sensorial aspects involved than purely visual ones. As is explained in the following descriptions:

- Verbal thinking is thinking via a chain of words and concepts, sequenced according to a logically acceptable, objective structure. There is no obvious link to personal sensory impressions. It is the accepted form of scientific reasoning. One may also rightly call it “sequential thinking” or “concept thinking.”
- Imaginal thinking is thinking in a multidimensional associative structure of images in time and space. Often, the structure has visual aspects, hence the term imaginal thinking. The image can be connected to sounds, feelings, or other sensory impressions. In that case imaginal thinking is a holistic, associative structure of experiences, perceptions, or pieces of imagination. Imaginal thinking is the way of thinking that includes our intuition and our creativity.

A couple of years previously, Mechel had extended this comparison in her essay “Everything Flows” . . . adding two more essential differences between the two (Ensing-Wijn, 2006).

1. *Imaginal thinking* is flow-like thinking (hence the article's title: Everything Flows . . .). Thoughts are never the same, because they are always connected to current sensorial input or sensorial recollections of learning experiences. *Verbal thinking* is convergent, oriented towards a center. By careful time-independent descriptions of objects or concepts and an analysis of their logically valid relations, a conclusion or decision is obtained.
2. *Imaginal thinking* is connected to movements in time and space, to processes of change. *Verbal thinking* follows step-like sequences of moments that can be accurately described and delimited. The “before,” “current,” and “after” of a situation are the focus.

The main point of discerning thinking styles is to facilitate understanding in communications between two individuals with differing styles: Their differing styles may lead to differing conclusions given a certain situation. When the underlying reason is not perceived nor understood, this may lead to amazement or irritation in communication.

Additionally, when someone is forced to operate in their non-preferred thinking mode, conclusions can turn out to be unsatisfactory, suboptimal, or worse, from the point of view of the decision maker. Finally, some people can easily switch between verbal and imaginal thinking, and most people use their non-preferred mode from time to time.

## **Imaginal Thinkers Prefer Xi**

My use of the concept “*extra intelligence*” or Xi, instead of giftedness, has shown itself to be attractive for people with a strong preference for imaginal thinking (whom I will call imaginal thinkers for short). They have often acquired a negative perspective on their own intelligence in the course of their school years. Given the common fallacy that giftedness leads to high school marks and that low marks indicate the lack of it, they are often quite sure that they cannot be gifted. But when they recognize themselves in essence in three or more of the five typical character traits of *extra intelligent people* (XIPs),<sup>1</sup> they become intrigued. Because of the opportunities our walk-in afternoon offers, they ask Mechel or me all kinds of questions, leave with much to think about, and quite often return for a follow-up of some kind.

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<sup>1</sup>I explained the concept in an article in Volume 11 of *Advanced Development* (Kuipers, 2007): “How to Charm Gifted Adults into Admitting Giftedness: Their Own and Somebody Else’s.” The five character traits are: Intellectually able, incurably inquisitive, need for autonomy, excessive zeal in pursuit of interests, and lack of balance between emotional and intellectual self-confidence.

Given their strength and preference in trusting and combining their own experiences, it is the personal recognition of their character traits that hits them strongly and often emotionally too. It convinces them more, or at least in a very different manner, than someone telling them their formally assessed high IQ score would achieve. That is, if the main message is the IQ score, this number would not excite them as such, where true verbal thinkers would strongly be impacted by being told its sheer numerical height and the statistics behind it.

To complete the perspective, I need to remark that it is my experience that people with a strong preference for verbal thinking usually are not very charmed with the concept of extra intelligence. They prefer the certainty of measurement/numbers and more or less distrust subjective assessments of uncommon intelligence. It is understandable, and in line with my observations, that strong verbal thinkers hardly come to me with their questions regarding giftedness. So, the people that feel attracted to visit our walk-in afternoons are not representative for the entire “gifted population,” the inclusivity of which of course depends on the definition of giftedness. Similarly, I am aware of having a limited understanding of those strong verbal thinkers, and of their reasons for this preference.

### **Extra Imaginal Thinking**

Mechel and I established that using the triad of intensity, complexity, and drive is also very useful to explain to very proficient imaginal thinkers why and how their competences are different from “average” imaginal thinkers. Their associative thinking is much richer and multi-dimensional, and the leaps in their thought processes are much larger. In other words, their imaginal thinking is more complex. In the company of verbal thinkers, e.g., at work, they may encounter two difficulties: being an imaginal thinker and experiencing more complex mental processes than is typical in their environment. Both can seriously hinder their effectiveness and happiness, especially when they have no clue why they often encounter blank faces after an, in their view, engaging or convincing presentation or argument.

Similarly, their intensity and drive impact their lives, just the way as is often described for the gifted. In fact, given their preference for sensorial imaginal input, other senses are often also well developed and overexcitabilities can be strong.

Over the years I have worked with many imaginal thinkers who did not have a formal assessment of their possible giftedness, but who clearly were personally familiar with the inner experience of giftedness and benefited from the knowledge that is available about the gifted condition. Thus their “inner experience of giftedness,” even when they were not assessed as gifted, helped them gain more clarity about their condition.

## **Beyond the Label Verbal or Imaginal Thinker**

The label “imaginal thinker” versus “verbal thinker” has its charm, like most labels, in reducing complexity to, in this case, a dichotomy. But in the case of the gifted, there are serious limitations in doing so:

1. Independent of their imaginal thinking abilities, they may have heightened perception in their other senses, which may influence their imaginal and/or verbal thinking: There are more thinking modes than verbal and imaginal thinking. What is someone’s preference given all their available modes, and how does this affect their decision processes?
2. Across the lifespan, both preferences and awareness of competences may change. Consider, for example, some characteristic waypoints in Fiedler’s description of the Navigators (age 50-65): coping with conflicting feelings . . . balancing everything in their lives . . . setting a new course in life (Fiedler, 2015, p. 124).
3. The higher or more developed their giftedness, the more complex and intense their thinking becomes, and in particular, quite often they become able to switch at will between imaginal and verbal thinking or do it (almost) simultaneously.

In my career coaching practice, all three situations occur. Situation 1 and 2 may concur when verbal thinkers become aware of their imaginal thinking abilities, or of the impact of their emotions on their seemingly rational decision making. Very able imaginal thinkers may discover that their way of imaginal thinking is highly and uncommonly complex, but also that their ability in verbal thinking has become much better over the years. In fact, after suffering many “stupid bosses” in their career, they may conclude that these bosses were “averagely intelligent,” but that they themselves are much smarter than their school career has suggested: late bloomers.

## **Depicting Ability in Both Verbal and Imaginal Thinking**

As I consider it my role to facilitate the personal development processes of my clients, I am always on the lookout for graphs or theories that describe, illustrate, and explain the diversity of personal characteristics. I want to help clients recognize old or current patterns and get a view of emerging ones that they can investigate more closely and make their own, if they wish.

As the gifted can be described as people with an overdose of competences and sensorial processing abilities, it is understandable that some of these abilities take time to become visible and

acceptable, to mature and to develop into a possibly unmissable tool for personal expression. That is what being intense, complex, and driven does to the gifted mind and body across the lifespan: While having a strong focus has its advantages, one may as a consequence overlook personal qualities for quite some time until a sudden personal crisis calls for reinventing oneself.

My aim was to design a scattergram (an image to accommodate imaginal thinking) with the following possibilities:

- illustrating someone's relative position, given both their preference for verbal or imaginal thinking and their ability in the two modes of thinking,
- framing imaginal thinking as being of equal value to verbal thinking with similar characteristics of a qualitative scale of abilities,
- showing how one can prefer verbal thinking but still be a very able imaginal thinker,
- visualizing how aspects of giftedness relate to extra intelligence.

The most versatile qualitative ability measure for the two axes that I could think of, was degree of complexity either in verbal or imaginal thinking.

I conceive someone's ability in verbal thinking to be related to the complexity of the verbal concepts they are comfortable using in their context. In verbal thinking, consider the difference between easily and aptly using concepts like table versus democracy versus obsessive-compulsive disorder. Similarly, consider the difference in being able to visualize and manipulate in your mind the image of a tree versus the possible molecular structures of  $C_4H_8$ , versus the exploded diagram of a large cruise ship.

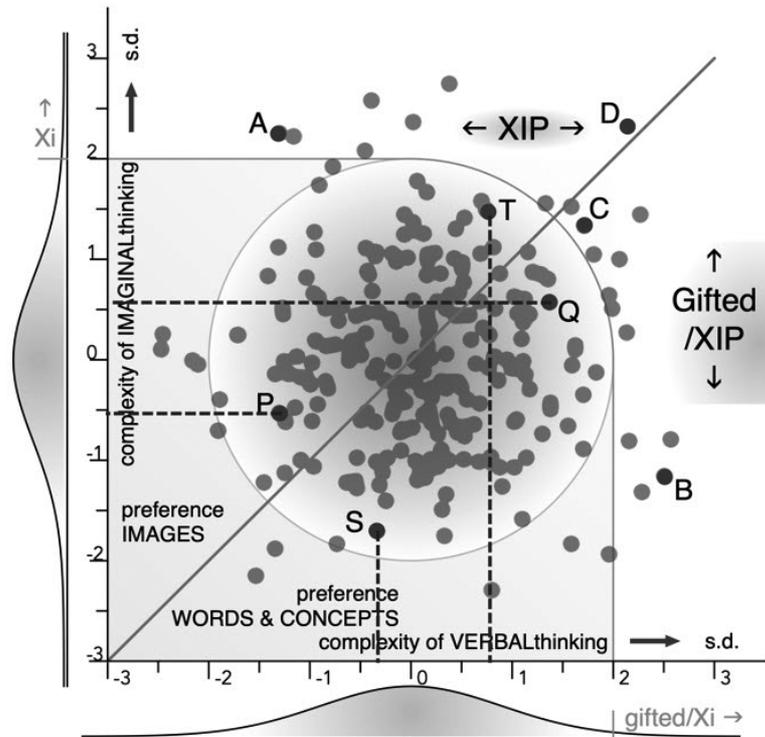
## The Construction of the Scattergram

The scattergram is meant to be a qualitative description of the relative frequency of levels of complexity in both verbal and imaginal thinking. Someone's position is subjectively estimated.

To construct the scattergram, I needed to make a couple of assumptions and choices. I considered them reasonable and practical. They are explicitly mentioned to help the interpretation of the various graphics and text in the scattergram:

- Ability in verbal and in imaginal thinking is normally distributed. (A bell curve like the one that is used to depict the relative frequency of possible IQ scores. See the curves to the left and below the two axes.)
- The relative frequency of abilities in both verbal and imaginal thinking can be depicted in a bivariate normal distribution. The scattergram depicts a bivariate normal distribution.

**Figure 1**  
**Scattergram of the Frequency**  
**of Various Combinations**  
**of Verbal and Imaginal Thinking Ability**



- Ability in verbal and imaginal thinking is not correlated. But if it were, the scattergram form will only become more oval instead of roundish, without changing the usability of the scattergram.
- People prefer to use their strongest thinking mode. The diagonal separates the two preferences.
- A score beyond two standard deviations (s.d.) is considered uncommon, approximately 2%, just the way giftedness is segmented. It means someone uses verbal or imaginal thinking in an uncommonly complex way.
- An uncommonly complex level of thinking correlates positively with the typical gifted characteristics of uncommon intensity, complexity, and drive.
- A score to the right of two standard deviations in verbal thinking denotes giftedness.
- A score beyond two standard deviations in verbal or imaginal thinking denotes extra intelligence.

I generated a 250-dot scattergram of a bivariate normal distribution as is depicted in Figure 1. Limiting the number to 250

dots helped reduce the clustering of dots and keep the image more open. The horizontal axis indicates ability in verbal thinking, the vertical axis in imaginal thinking. On both axes a normal distribution is projected. The dots in the scattergram represent fictitious individuals with a specific combination of verbal and imaginal thinking ability.

To the right of two standard deviations on the horizontal axis, and above two standard deviations on the vertical axis, a dot indicates an uncommonly high level of either verbal thinking (a gifted or extra intelligent person, e.g., dot B) or imaginal thinking (an extra intelligent person, e.g., dot A), or both (e.g., dot D). The diagonal line roughly separates people with a preference for imaginal thinking from the ones with a preference for verbal thinking.

In the figure, person Q illustrates that someone with a typical preference and ability for verbal thinking can additionally be more able in visual thinking than a somewhat regular visual thinker (person P). Similarly person T illustrates a visual thinker who is more proficient in verbal thinking than a somewhat average verbal thinker (person S).

## Applications to Career Counseling

As mentioned, the usefulness of the scattergram lies in illustrating uncommon qualities, compared to the environment of the client, and in showing changing preferences and its implications for profession and life choices. But it can also show the diversity of being uncommonly intense, complex, and driven applied to partners or children of clients. Following are examples of how to apply the information in the scattergram to career counseling:

- Given the 250 dots used, fewer than 7 dots are beyond 2 standard deviations, both for verbal and imaginal thinking ability. Given the frequency of a score beyond 3 standard deviations (less than 0.1%), these individuals are just not visible when only 250 dots are used. This shows the uncommonness and possible incomparability to others of these individuals, e.g., the highly gifted and beyond.
- Consider person B, someone who is gifted, but not a very able imaginal thinker. They may have a partner or children that can be depicted as person C or person A. Both are not likely to be assessed as gifted, especially person A, who even may be dyslexic. But with respect to their personal levels of intensity, complexity, and drive, they are birds of a feather.
- Young adult A, extra intelligent and working in a visually creative profession, may face deception and confusion about not fitting in that his or her parent B, gifted and working already for decades in academia, has been facing already all his or her life and still has never gotten used to. But if they

understand the underlying reason and the similarity of their situations, they can support each other and possibly create better interventions to deal with it.

- What about person C? Do quite high scores in both imaginal and verbal thinking ability add up to gifted expression, and is this measurable by tests? Or, does it just lead to being very versatile, whatever the situation?
- What about person D who is very able in both imaginal and verbal thinking? Do they choose to be very smart in a verbal thinking profession and use that imaginal excellence in their spare time? Or, is the profession visually creative and the office perfectly organized?
- Consider that someone's position can change over the years, both through growing awareness of someone's abilities, or through fluctuating abilities due to changes across the lifespan, as mentioned before. Consider person Q who may not have been very aware of their imaginal thinking, but through a combination of a hobby gone wild and being fired at the office, decides to really go for the hobby and discovers in the process that they are actually positioned much higher on the vertical axis. Such may happen when your parents did not encourage your imaginal thinking style, and you did not come across a situation to discover its excellence earlier.

The applicability of the scattergram can basically be extended to illustrate rational versus experiential thinking, as put forward in Epstein's Cognitive Experiential Theory that will be introduced next.

## **Cognitive-Experiential Theory**

In our interactions with clients, my colleague Mechel and I have noticed for many years now a number of imaginal thinking characteristics were also present in people with quite limited imaginal abilities; it seemed that other senses were (strongly) involved. We observed: (1) kinesthetic learners, who were intense, complex, and driven, as long as they could move their bodies in the process, could compare the new situation to previous bodily experiences and (2) emotionally sensitive people needed to become aware of their feelings and emotions before coming to a conclusion.

Both groups preferred their "subjective sensorial experience" to an "objective logical inference structure" to make their decisions. They were very proficient in their "imaginal" thinking style, and far less efficient when they were forced to use a verbal thinking style. Given my need for some theoretical context to explain this diversity and to help my clients become aware of and apply their strong qualities, I was intrigued when I came across the Cognitive Experiential Theory by Seymour Epstein.

## **An Introduction to Cognitive-Experiential Theory**

In 2018 I became acquainted with the Cognitive-Experiential Theory by Seymour Epstein, in short CET or C-E theory, formerly referred to as CEST (cognitive-experiential self-theory) (Epstein, 2014). Epstein's theory explains how each person simultaneously uses two information-processing systems: an experiential system, which automatically learns by experiencing, and a rational system that is a verbal system of logical reasoning.

Our experiential system is similar to that which higher animals have developed over millions of years of evolution, although it may operate in a more complex way due to our larger brain capacity. Our rational system is unique to humans because it requires the use of grammatical language.

Seymour Epstein was professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst from 1953 to 1997, then professor emeritus until his death. He started formulating CET in the 1970s. It is one of the earliest and most widely cited modern dual-process theories<sup>2</sup>. He authored over 150 publications in a period of 63 years. His latest book (Epstein, 2014) was published when he was almost 90 (O'Brien et al., 2018).

CET is a personality theory that compares rational thinking and experiential thinking in a clear way and explains how both forms can influence or dominate each other and thus determine all our actions. It emphasizes that the rational system is not considered superior to the experiential system: Logical reasoning is not always the best solution to a real-life problem.

Every person has developed and continues to develop a certain skill level in each of the two systems, and a certain degree of preference as to which to use habitually. Some people are strongly driven by their experiential thinking and rarely by their rational reasoning skills, while others do it the other way around. Of course, everyone uses both systems every day, for example, when using language or selecting clothes in the morning, but even there, differences between the mix of the two will occur.

It is plausible that one's skills in either system play a role in determining one's preference, but there may also be strong emotional reasons for preferring rational thinking as a means to keep control over one's expression towards the outside world. CET provides a referential model for becoming more aware of one's inner choices between "following the head or the heart," or between rational mind and experience, as well as for learning how to balance these choices more effectively. It is a paradigmatically different way of thinking about thinking.

In Table 1, I present my concise interpretation of the characteristic differences between Epstein's rational and the

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<sup>2</sup>A concept familiarized to the wider public by Nobel-prize winner Kahneman's (2011) *Thinking, fast and slow*.

**Table 1**  
**Comparison of Rational and Experiential Systems**

<b>Rational System</b>	<b>Experiential System</b>
1. Solving problems by conscious reasoning	1. Solving problems through what was automatically learned from experience
2. Verbal: encoding information in abstract symbols, including words and numbers	2. Nonverbal: encoding information often in images, “movies” or other sensorial modalities
3. Considering primarily what is regarded as logical and accurate	3. Pursuing what feels good and avoiding what feels bad
4. Constructing cause and effect relations among stimuli, responses, and outcomes	4. Experiencing associative connections between stimuli, responses, and outcomes
5. Being free of emotions and desires	5. Being driven by emotions to a certain extent, depending on personal history
6. Slower processing and capable of long-delayed action after reaching a conclusion	6. Rapid processing of stimuli: ready for immediate reaction, impulsive
7. Analytic reasoning	7. Holistic processing
8. Changing more readily: can change conclusions with the speed of thought	8. Resisting change: changes behavior through repetitive or intense experiences
9. Requiring validation through logic and evidence	9. Self-evidently validating: experiencing is believing

experiential system. The starting point of the theory is that every person makes use of both systems simultaneously. They operate in parallel as well as interactively. Sometimes one system dominates, sometimes the other. Sometimes we think we are behaving strictly rationally, while our experiential system subconsciously influences our reasoning and choice, and vice versa.

### **Application of CET to the Inner Experience of Giftedness Over the Lifespan**

The cognitive-experiential theory fits with the findings of recent neurological research, for example, the role and effects of various

emotions. Think of Antonio Damasio's (1999) quote, "I feel, therefore I am," or Richard Davidson's (2012) concept of emotional styles. The theory also fits with the conclusions of primatologist Frans de Waal (2016), about the cumulating evidence of the similarities of behavioral patterns between higher mammals and humans, whereas—certainly in the past—the focus of many natural scientists was on proving the differences while illustrating the absolute superiority of Man. To me, it positions overexcitabilities and intuition, typically strongly present characteristics in many gifted and extra intelligent people, in a coherent and balanced whole, instead of framing it as a difficult and additional factor that should be properly controlled so as not to interfere with a rationality-based expression of one's giftedness.

It makes sense to assume that any inner *experience* of giftedness is firmly grounded in the *experiential* system. Similarly, it makes sense to assume that dealing consciously with these experiences will work out differently when using one's rational system, or one's experiential system. In my practice, different people tell different stories about these experiences: Some will rationalize them, sometimes leading to the conclusion that their experiences do not really exist. Some clients find the discovery that they are much smarter than they have always thought they were to be so unsettling that experiencing all aspects of their condition is just too much. In the long run, however, it does not always work out well when emotionally-loaded content is rationalized, although it can be useful to help calm oneself down for that moment. Other clients are happy to find a way to finally understand the origin behind the various experiences of their uncommonness that had already puzzled them for quite a while.

Epstein's (2014) remark, that the experiential system becomes more "actively present" while the rational system weakens across the lifespan, is reflected in the Waypoints and Strategies that can be found in Fiedler's (2015) book on bright adults across the lifespan.

To make my point, below is a very limited selection from her descriptions:

*Voyagers*, 25-35: Career decisions and career moves, advanced training;

*Explorers*, 35-50: Questioning everything about their lives; reevaluating patterns of thinking, behaving, and responding to others;

*Navigators*, 50-65: Coping with conflicting feelings and asynchronous development; dealing with dissatisfaction; balancing everything in their lives;

*Actualizers*, 65-80: Enjoying greater clarity about their identity.

In line with Fiedler's descriptions, I can add my experiences as a career coach: I definitely have met many clients in their *Navigator*

phase, who are searching for ways to deal with feelings about themselves and their careers that they had quite successfully neglected until that moment. The trigger is usually an external event, like having trouble with their job, or that stunning discovery—after so many years—of being gifted or extra intelligent. They then feel the need to find balance and understand their past, both for the earlier mentioned late bloomers, as well as for the successful verbal thinkers that find out that there is more going on in their bodies than “just” brilliant thoughts in their brains.

The *Explorers* that have come to me most often have to deal with questions about meaning. However, in order to be able to answer those questions, they have to become aware of what deep down inside is important to them, and understand that it is the experiential system that gives satisfying and sustainable answers. This is especially true for members of this group who are in the process of observing their young children struggling with being different and uncommon, being visual learners at school, or coping with their overexcitabilities. They begin questioning everything about their lives and can no longer avoid becoming consciously aware of their experiential system. It definitely helps to offer those adults a theory about how their minds operate according to two very different systems, which both have their own unique way and value. Their partners and children most often benefit too.

Lately I see, intriguingly, an increase in *Voyagers* visiting me, who are struggling with their high expectations resulting in being almost burned-out or feeling somewhat lost about what to choose or do. Apart from the typical “discovery of their own giftedness” issues, there are these balancing issues as well. I have not yet concluded whether I have gradually become more attractive to *Voyagers*, due to my own processes, the frameworks I apply, my life phase, or whether it is just part of a larger trend. But in any case, I find it works well to show them a more comprehensive approach to being gifted or extra intelligent, including a discussion of their inner experiences of their condition, while using CET.

## **The Art of Balance**

Just to be sure, however, I would like to point out that—in my philosophy—the art of living one’s life has much to do, not with *having* dual systems, but with an authentic and dynamic *balancing* of the two. The intention is not of reaching a 50-50 state as everyone will have their own natural mix at a certain point in their lives. Finding that balance when you are complex and intense and driven is a delicate, but also rewarding, process. Awareness of the characteristics of both systems is certainly helpful to that end, and it is also relevant to be aware that this mix will need rebalancing on multiple occasions across the lifespan, as I pointed out above, and as I have quite disturbingly discovered since joining the Actualizers.

To be frank, that is why it is intriguing to me to have so many relatively young clients for whom this lack of balance, also in other parts of their lives, seems so disruptive. Since my own ability to consciously experience has rather increased lately, I have discovered more deeply how dealing with item 9 of Table 1 can be an inner struggle. In my case for instance when writing an academic paper the balancing of “self-evidently validating: experiencing is believing” with “requiring validation through logic and evidence” has become more difficult, as not all experiences can be described or proven in their true essence while following a logical sequence of words. The more complex and intense the experience, the more difficult it becomes to describe it, while the inner, self-evident validation becomes stronger too. This creates a new source for “gifted impatience and frustration” when not feeling properly understood.

### **CET Broadens the Concept of Verbal/Imaginal Thinking**

One of the reasons that I became so enthusiastic about CET was the connection that I perceived between the rational system and verbal thinking on the one hand and the experiential system and imaginal thinking on the other hand. What could this connection offer to better understand the inner experience of giftedness? In this section I explain the connection and what insights it may bring.

It requires little explanation that *verbal thinking* operates similarly to *rational thinking* as described in CET, and that *imaginal thinking* operates similarly to a relatively visual way of *experiential thinking*: Just consider the strong overlap in characteristics.

But experiential thinking involves much more than is covered by the word imaginal: thinking with a strong visual component. We do have more senses that provide us with information, so you may encounter many alternative modes to imaginal thinking, depending on one’s skill and preference in handling, for example, tactile or intuitive information and all kinds of emotional cues. Consider the kinesthetic learners and the emotionally sensitive people who, as I mentioned in the previous paragraph, came to our practice and walk-in afternoons. And many gifted clients discover the strength of their intuition when they are shown how it works and how one can learn to trust it.

In fact, it quite often happens in my practice that someone’s unusual *non-visual* expression of experiential thinking has remained unnoticed and underdeveloped, nor appreciated for its level of excellence, until the situation that led to a need for career coaching demonstrates and proves its usefulness. That is especially the case with the more extremely gifted and XIPs: Given the abundance of competences, there is often a “sufficient” skill in verbal thinking, which means that a possible *excellent* level of experiential thinking may pass unnoticed, underdeveloped, nor used at school or work.

When in need, one may see these qualities suddenly bursting out, and possibly even a career switch as a result.

## CET and the Scattergram

Given the previously mentioned connection between CET and verbal/imaginal thinking, the question that arises is whether the scattergram in Figure 1 can also be used to describe the frequency of combinations of rational and experiential thinking ability. Checking the assumptions and choices that I made to construct the scattergram shows that they can be similarly applied to construct a scattergram for frequency of combinations of rational and experiential thinking ability. However, the subjective assessment of someone's ability in experiential thinking is certainly different from assessing the complexity of someone's imaginal thinking ability. The rational thinking assessment may be more similar to the verbal thinking assessment.

Epstein's (1998) book, *Constructive Thinking: The Key to Emotional Intelligence*, relates cognitive-experiential theory to the concept of emotional intelligence, as introduced by Goleman (1995). He carefully specifies his definitions, and then states:

Human beings operate by two minds, an *experiential mind*, which learns directly by experience, is preconscious, operates automatically, and is intimately associated with emotions and a *rational mind*, which operates according to logical inference, is conscious, deliberative, and relatively emotion-free. . . . The intelligence of the rational mind is what IQ tests measure, and its essence is the ability to solve abstract problems. The intelligence of the experiential mind includes practical intelligence, social intelligence, and emotional intelligence. (p. 9)

Through these statements, a description of the experiential mind is in an inclusive way linked to specific intelligences. This offers the possibility of considering that not only the rational mind can show the typical signs of giftedness, such as dealing with complexity in an intense and focused way. Indeed, we are invited to consider that the experiential mind can have its own ways of being "uncommonly complex and intense," achieving mastery and excellence in its expression of those abilities.

From the perspective of career coaching across the lifespan, this makes sense; I have witnessed how various clients made real switches in their careers, while continuing their expression of complexity, intensity, and drive. In fact, quite often the intensity increased, which is mostly linked to the experiential system that they decided to apply more than in their previous activities. Additionally, their experiential system proved to be more complex than they had

expected, making its expression all the more worthwhile. I find it helpful to use CET to explain the extent of these changes and to stimulate them to take good care of their experiential system, given their increased (potential) use of it.

### **A Lack of Balance Shows Itself**

Interestingly, the scattergram shows that the more complex either mode of thinking is, the larger the possible difference between the two can be, illustrated by the distance to the diagonal. This is in fact something that can be observed in the gifted and extra intelligent population and usually negatively influences the expression of their giftedness, as I have come to realize in my coaching practice.

When someone strongly recognizes the fifth characteristic of having extra intelligence and intensity (Xi)—lack of balance between emotional and intellectual self-confidence—this proves to be an indication of a lack of balance between their experiential and rational minds. In case of a lack of balance, strong experiential thinkers report that their intellectual self-confidence is lower than their emotional self-confidence, while strong rational thinkers report the opposite:

- “Classical nerds” know, and fear, deep inside that their intellectual brilliance can be simply overruled or even annihilated by non-intellectual power.
- Strongly experiential, creative thinkers can suddenly feel very insecure when questioned about the intellectual or scientific validity of their ideas. “Did you let that idea just settle in your head without proper analysis and verification?!”

Some of these experiential (or at least imaginal) thinkers have been haunted for decades by their experiences during their school career, where they were taught that a rational mind was obviously superior to their variety of mind, having a strong and able experiential mind.

Again, the scattergram offers a way of making this issue visible and open to discussion. The next step is to find ways to either make the difference smaller or handle it more effectively.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Most people change in the course of their lives. Due to their intensity, complexity, and drive, the inner changes of the gifted (and extra intelligent) can be relatively large across their lifespan. Throughout their lives, they need the rich source of information that the inner experience of their giftedness offers them to become consciously aware of these changes and possibly manage the process of growth and change.

In my career coaching practice for gifted and extra intelligent adults, the real issue is often about finding a new balance between

“following the head or the heart,” where the head likes to reason and the heart is filled with all kinds of relevant sensorial information. Abilities and preferences in both domains differ between people, but also change across the lifespan.

However, ability in self-awareness is not equally distributed across humankind. In my practice I have often found that extraverted people may need an external mirror to see themselves, while the introverted look into their inner mirror every night, or at daybreak.

In both cases it is helpful to have tools to make these changes and their possible consequences visible and open to discussion. Both the scattergram and CET can prove instruments in achieving that purpose, as I have experienced in my coaching practice. Discussing someone’s inner balance between using their rational or their experiential mind becomes feasible with these tools. Most often clients discover new aspects of their experiential mind as they open up this as yet undiscovered or underdeveloped side of themselves. As a coach this is a beautiful and heartwarming experience to witness.

In any case, being consciously aware of the existence and workings of one’s experiential mind definitely helps to balance the wheels of the Formula 1 car that the gifted innately drive, making its steering and grip on the road ahead more accurate and safe. It is really well worth getting to know that part of oneself that generally unfolds and shows itself in all its gifted splendor only across the lifespan.

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