

Vicky Prefers Voltaire to Vogue:
**Obstacles to the Self-actualisation of Gifted Women within
Social Systems**

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Abstract: Giftedness is characterized by high intellectual capabilities and ambitions, unconventional thinking, and a drive to learn and be creative. We argue that gifted women face specific obstacles that, for many, have precluded their ability to develop their gifts, hindered their educational development and career, and made them feel frustrated and unfulfilled. We analyse testimonies of gifted women that we collected from across the globe to provide concrete evidence of these hurdles, thereby highlighting their struggles, while noting in particular their experiences of shame, guilt, fear and self-doubt. A full understanding of these issues requires a deconstruction of the symbolic paradigm that underpins the social system we live in. As gifted women are by nature drawn to creative, independent, intellectual pursuits, they deviate from the norms imposed by the social system. The resulting negative reactions frequently lead them to believe there is something intrinsically wrong with them. This produces the painful emotion of shame, which potently suppresses self-actualization.

Introduction

Self-actualisation, i.e. the full development of an individual's talents, requires the ability to find one's own path in life by exploring a wide range of possibilities and choosing the ones that best fits one's personality, circumstances and interests (Maslow, 1970)(Heylighen, 1992)). Gifted women commonly encounter a range of social and psychological barriers that prevent them from actualizing their creative and academic potentials (Hollinger & Fleming, 1984; Noble, 1987; Reis, 2001, 2002). They are more often than not encouraged to alter their behaviour and/or outlook to match the expectations of the social system rather than develop their own personality. We propose that the set of problems encumbering gifted women's self-actualisation has its locus in the social, cultural and economic topography.

People are not *tabula rasa* who inhabit a world with an objective value system, but rather reside in a 'reality' that can only be perceived through, acted within and is structured according to, the values of the social system. This social system proscribes certain behaviours and actions whilst prescribing others, according to gender, age and other labels. In a process of social objectification and categorisation human beings are thereby given a social and personal identity. As Foucault suggested 'the subject is objectified by a process of division either within himself or from others' (Foucault 1982:208). The aim is to segregate people into

different categories with the goal of transforming humans into objects to be trained, manipulated and controlled so that they would optimally perform their prescribed role.

In a previous paper, we have analysed social systems as autopoietic networks of distinctions and rules that govern the interactions between individuals (Heylighen et al 2018). The rules and values promoted comprise a system of control, specifying how individuals should act under the specified conditions. Hence, a social system can be modelled as a network of condition-action rules that directs the behaviour of individual agents. These rules have evolved through the repeated reinforcement of certain types of social actions. In our paper (Heylighen et al 2018), we show how neural, behavioural and emotional mechanisms have been co-opted for social control, focusing more specifically on four primary negative emotions viz., *fear*, *guilt*, *shame* and *disgust*. Deviation from the norms is suppressed by inducing fear of punishment and ostracism, guilt about wrongful thoughts or actions, shame about personal deficiencies, and disgust for pollutions of the “pure” social order. Although some degree of control is necessary to prevent anti-social behaviour such as crime or violence, through these suppressive mechanisms, social systems also tend to inhibit individual emancipation, self-actualisation and societal progress thereby privileging a ‘herd’ mentality, which ensures that individuals do not deviate from their prescribed roles.

Those who question or diverge from prescribed rules and regulations imperil the cohesive functioning of the social system and must be penalized to ensure that they do not dismantle or challenge the roles and rules endemic to the social system. Basic conditioning is undertaken through reward and reinforcement of socially sanctioned actions and punishment for neglecting them. In order for the social system to survive and perpetuate its control over all aspects of society, it depends upon a supply of docile humans who will not question its values and will function as an obedient labour force. That requires a cultural model that prescribes specific roles for women. In most parts of the world, women are put in an inferior, domestic role as opposed to the autonomous, extra-domestic role reserved for men, preventing women from exploring other avenues than those prescribed. Although our society is slowly changing and acknowledging the disparities between the rights and opportunities of men and women, this change has been slow. Women were only given the right to vote in the UK in 1918, the USA in 1920, Saudia Arabia in 2011, while still not allowed to vote in the Vatican. We must recognise that we still have a long way to go. The advent of #metoo suggests that up until now too little has been done to address the abusive ramifications of inequality.

We must further note that the inferior position of women in relation to men in society, the attribution of specific roles to each gender, or the notion of the nuclear family are not natural. Gendered roles and social configurations are social constructions. They are sustained only by the demands and values prescribed and proscribed by the social system. In most present-day societies, women are designated with the role of primary caregiver of children and are responsible for the core of domestic chores, while non-domestic, non-primary caregiver roles are allotted to men.

The present predominance of this model does not mean it is timeless or universal. Anthropologists recognise that in societies across the world there exist multiple configurations of gendered roles and that gender itself is a social construction (Butler 1990).

Societies possess variegated social constructions of gender, such as third gender roles, and roles differ cross-culturally. For example, amongst the Mosuo of China there is no word for 'father' or 'husband'. Mosuo have 'walking marriages' where the man and the woman do not live together even if they engage in sexual relations. Children are raised by the mother and her siblings. This is a matriarchal society where property is handed down through the female line. Women engage in hard manual labour, are in charge of their own financial affairs, and make business decisions. This is 'a culture in which women have always had the same rights and freedoms as men' (Saini 2017:28). It is myopic to assume that gendered roles are the product of biology and that the nuclear family is the 'natural' set up (ibid.). Amongst the Aka of the Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of the Congo, the men display extremely high and intimate involvement in the raising of their children. For example, they frequently offer their nipples to babies as pacifiers. Hewlett's study (1991) of the egalitarian relationships between Aka parents towards their offspring again suggests that the presently prevalent parenting models are neither universal nor innate to human beings, either biologically or psychologically, but are products of the social system.

In the social system that is currently predominant across most of our world, it is generally expected that women should have at least one child during their life, be the primary caregivers of all offspring and assume the majority of domestic chores. Concomitantly, men are expected to seek paid labour outside the sphere of the household. Associated character traits and activities are prescribed and proscribed to both genders in correlation to their roles. This configuration ensures that there is a ceaseless supply of humans to fulfil the labour tasks demanded by the social system.

This prescribed configuration, which is naturalised and presented as innate to human society, structures reality and straitjackets the role of men and women within it, according to specific socially sanctioned rules. Individual agents are required to enact the specific roles and take on the gender-dependent characteristics of these roles in such a way that the system, its rules, and the norms it prescribes for males and females are persistently reproduced. Those who do not fulfil their role will face repercussions. They are commonly punished by harnessing the emotions of guilt, fear, shame and disgust that the social system has co-opted to reinforce its power (Heylighen, Kingsbury, Lenartowicz, Harmsen, & Beigi, in press).

In this paper we propose that the inherent psychological characteristics of gifted women drive them to diverge from the roles prescribed by the social system for the female gender. We suggest that their unusual intellectual and creative abilities often lead them to adopt behaviours that may be considered atypical or deviant. As a result of diverging from the edicts of the social system, gifted females, as girls and later as women, are frequently subject to adverse reactions, punishment and other negative reinforcements intended to ensure obedience to specific roles. Based on the testimonies of gifted women we collected, we suggest that one emotion, out of the set of four, is experienced above all others: shame. To a lesser degree, they also feel guilt for their behaviours that the social system deems unsuitable for the female gender, and fear for the repercussions. We propose that this experience of shame often prevents gifted women from striving towards their goals, making them obscure their abilities so that they fit more easily into the non-intellectual, domestic-oriented roles

stipulated by the social system, rather than pursue cerebral and/or creative activities. Over the long-term, such negative experiences hinder gifted women in achieving self-actualisation.

We will proceed by first defining the term 'gifted'. We then present testimonies from gifted women that evince their experiences and sensations such as guilt, fear and shame. Following this we will deconstruct the category of sex and gender. We will propose that sex and gender, and hence the terms 'woman' and 'man' are socio-cultural concepts that have been established by the social system as a means of controlling and instrumentalising its power, entailing that human beings, rather than being taken for their humanity, become mere tools for the social system's perpetuation.

Characteristics of Giftedness

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the situations that gifted women face it is necessary to define the term 'gifted'. This is a term that is by now well-established in the domains of psychology, creativity and education, being covered by a very extensive literature (e.g. Jacobsen, 2000; Kerr, 2009; Shavinina, 2009; Silverman, 2012; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005). Of course, a term that aggregates heterogeneous individuals into a single category is always a simplifying, subjective and to some degree contentious construct. This may create imagined exclusivities as well as 'others', who by virtue of their differences may potentially be viewed as outsiders who on account of their status thus are deemed lesser or even dangerous in some way. However without such a label certain trenchant issues cannot be discussed. As will be evident in the testimonies given by gifted women, although their life histories and experiences differ, they are linked by recurrent patterns. We propound that these parallels furnish both an understanding and a means of comprehending the difficulties faced by gifted women. Let us then review these traits prevalent among the gifted, noting that of course not all gifted people share all of them to the same degree.

Gagné, who has worked with gifted children, defines giftedness as the natural possession and utilisation of untrained and spontaneously expressed innate abilities, which he terms 'gifts'. These allow a child to perform in the highest 10% of his or her age peers (Gagné 1985). In his model Gagné differentiates between *giftedness* and *talent*. Giftedness designates a natural ability, whereas a *talent* is a skill that has been well honed. Gagné argues that an individual may commence with gifts that with the correct catalysts may be developed into exceptional talents. These catalysts may consist of anything from more abstract factors, such as motivation, interests and chance, to more tangible, environmental ones, such as family and school. Crucially, Gagné points out that these gifts will remain *in posse*, unless they are recognised and developed into talents. Socio-cultural factors play a pivotal role in determining whether or not these gifts are actualized. As we will suggest, the maternal, domestic or passive roles that the social system tends to impose on women actively curbs the development of their gifts.

Prima facie it may appear convenient to use IQ tests to determine giftedness. In IQ tests the number of correct answers to a standard questionnaire is normalized so that the average score for the population is 100 and the standard deviation 15. Giftedness is sometimes defined as having an IQ above 130, while an IQ above 160 defines exceptional

giftedness (Silverman, 2012). Yet, the longitudinal studies of Terman and Oden (1947, 1959) suggest that this may not be a reliable means of determining giftedness. We therefore prefer an approach that identifies giftedness not through a single measure such as IQ, but through an array of cognitive, emotional and motivational characteristics that tend to co-occur in gifted individual—as exemplified by the Characteristics of Giftedness Scale (Silverman, 2012). One of the most basic characteristics is that the gifted rapidly comprehend complex and abstract concepts, being able to connect seemingly unrelated phenomena and information into a coherent view. They are quick learners and have excellent memories (Freeman, 1985; Guilford, Scheuerle, & Schonburn, 1981), as manifested in their extensive vocabulary (Borkowski & Peck, 1986; Terman & Oden, 1947) and heightened ability to use language in general. They are highly imaginative (Piechowski, Silverman & Falk, 1985), displaying great creativity marked by unusual ideas. Furthermore they possess a heightened sensory and affective sensitivity, experiencing emotions and events with unusual intensity—both positively and negatively. Concomitantly, they suffer a weakness that Dabrowski has termed 'over-excitability' (1972; Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski & Cunningham, 1985; Gallagher, 1985). Such extreme reactions to stimuli can be beneficial if channelled into creative work, but detrimental otherwise.

. They are generally highly curious and possess advanced skills of critical analysis. They laud intellectual autonomy and are thus not afraid to question rules and authority. They tend to be perfectionists (Clark, 2006; Whitmore, 1980) who demand very high standards from themselves and others. They enjoy cerebral challenges, love any form of learning and have a very broad range of interests. Because of their non-conformist views, gifted persons may feel that they do not fit in socially. They are often misunderstood and seen as strange. Their iconoclastic beliefs and behaviours, combined with their intensity, perfectionism, tendency to question authority and accepted wisdom, and propensity to be 'too smart' may lead gifted people to be treated with enmity by others around them, especially as they do not fit the roles they are expected to play. This is a problem particularly for gifted women because these do not fall into the gendered stereotypes demanded of them by society.

Noble, a psychologist who works with gifted women, has described how these women often feel isolated and alienated, presuming that there is something 'wrong' with them (Noble 1987). They are often embarrassed and ashamed of their abilities and seek to modify them. Due to the lack of recognition of their abilities they may not have the opportunity to develop their talents. These may stagnate and in more serious scenarios this may lead to severe problems such as eating disorders, severe psychological ailments and drug abuse. Typically, gifted women experience high levels of shame over and above guilt and fear. Shame, as we have previously described (Heylighen et al. 2018), is a particularly pernicious emotion, more inimical than guilt. This is because whilst guilt may be directed at a specific action performed by a person and later atoned for, shame is directed at the person as a whole (Tangney et al., 1996). Therefore whilst guilt can be remedied through redemptive measures, shame is much more difficult to overcome as it results from what is perceived to be an enduringly deficient self (Tangney & Dearing, 2003). Our hypothesis is that gifted women are particularly vulnerable to this negative emotion because their personality characteristics and concomitant behavior simply do not match the ones expected of them by the social system, thus making them feel intrinsically “deficient”.

Collection of testimonies from gifted women

To find evidence that might corroborate, correct or elaborate this and related hypotheses, we decided to ask the gifted women themselves how they felt about their situation. We did this by circulating a letter entitled “Gifted Women: an appeal for personal testimonies” across the Internet (available at <http://ecco.vub.ac.be/?q=node/286>). The letter summarized the traits that characterize giftedness, and explained our rationale for soliciting personal experiences from women who recognized themselves in those traits. In particular, we asked them to tell us which personal, social or emotional obstacles they experienced that hindered them in realizing their full potential, and to do so in the form of an autobiographical story. We assured them of anonymity and they had the option to send it to us via an anonymized email service. They also had the option to send it to either of the two authors of this paper. Perhaps not surprisingly, practically all of the testimonies were sent to the female author (KK), while the male author (FH) received only one or two.

Our appeal was initially sent to a selection of women whom we had strong reasons to assume that they were gifted and/or professionally engaged with gifted people. It was further posted on three Internet forums dedicated to giftedness (including the Facebook page of the European Council for High Abilities), from where it may have propagated further. We received responses from across the globe from gifted girls and women of all age ranges and backgrounds. While the fact that the appeal was formulated in English may have biased the response towards the Anglophone world, we received contributions from countries as diverse as Brazil, Iran, Norway, Greece and New Zealand. Another possible bias is that the appeal specifically asked to relate difficulties experienced. This may have excluded women who felt they did not experience any particular difficulties. Thus, the sample we collected is inevitably biased, and may not be representative for gifted women in general. However, the numerous and enthusiastic reactions we received seem to indicate that there exists at least a large group of gifted women who did feel addressed by our appeal. In total, our sample contained some 30 testimonies, most of which were quite long and detailed, making for a combined text corpus of some 30 000 words or 60 pages.

These testimonies were very diverse in length, style, and content, but all were highly personal, expressing intensely experienced events and emotions with the kind of intelligent, detailed observations and lively language that can be expected from the gifted. This makes it difficult to perform an objective analysis of the material. As a first quantitative test of our hypotheses, we searched the combined document for the words “shame” or “ashamed”, and found 19 occurrences. By way of comparison, a similar search across four extensive reference works on giftedness (Heller, Mönks, Subotnik, & Sternberg, 2000; Kerr, 2009; Shavinina, 2009; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005), totalling over 4000 pages, found a mere 10 occurrences in total. None of these refer to people feeling shame specifically because of their giftedness, but they refer to shame experienced in contexts such as eating disorders, depression, or people with disabilities. This seems to indicate a serious gap in the giftedness literature, which our study may start to address.

In our sample, we further found 17 occurrences of “fear”, 13 of “depressed/“depression”, 9 of “guilt/guilty”, 9 of “anxious/anxiety”, 8 of “angry/anger”, and 6 of “lonely/loneliness”. The

fact that shame was the most commonly mentioned of the negative emotions is remarkable because shame is a complex, painful and ill-understood feeling, which people often confuse with guilt or embarrassment (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996), and which they would rather hide or repress than admit or talk about (Lewis, 1995; Tangney & Dearing, 2003)—in contrast to more “accepted” emotions such as guilt, anger or fear. That the women in our sample still decided to mention it (apparently unlike in most other studies) may be because the appeal primed reflections on this emotion, by asking them to report on “social and psychological factors, such as family expectations, shame, guilt, self-doubt, feeling abnormal, lonely, or excluded, that may have hindered you in fully realizing your potential.” But this should have equally primed more acceptable emotions, such as guilt, loneliness and exclusion, while these were not mentioned as frequently.

Still, our material is too limited to allow a reliable quantitative analysis. Therefore we have opted to propose a more qualitative interpretation based on an admittedly subjective selection of excerpts. In order not to silence a voice that has long been suppressed, we would rather present them as they were delivered to us as opposed to summarising them. To protect the identity of the contributors, all names have been replaced with fictional ones. Following reception of these testimonials, which were often supplemented with additional comments as participants frequently sought to clarify or add to their initial feedback, we compared and contrasted the testimonies, looking for commonalities. We noted numerous parallels, which we illustrate in the following section by quoting typical experiences.

Representative excerpts from the testimonies

The gifted women in our sample have struggled with a plethora of problems. They are often underestimated, they tend to underestimate and doubt themselves, may face sexism, racism and abuse, are shamed, made to feel guilty, and fear their talents. Furthermore they are often impeded from pursuing their passions, which in general are of an academic or creative nature, and this commences at a young age. Anna, for example reports that:

‘At the age of six, I was begging to go to school, but I was supposed to wait until seven. Mom had to ask a friend to “make a mistake” in my enrolling papers so that I could be accepted to the 1st grade one year before...I completed the whole book in the first week and asked the teacher to give me another one. She replied, ‘no, you cannot have another book before the 2nd grade’.

Selina’s testimony echoes Anna’s; once again an authority figure did not want to encourage a gifted girl to pursue her education:

‘I begged my parents to let me go to boarding school, but they said that it would have been a waste of money, they also discouraged university or other further education.’

Florence had a similar experience. When she was four years old, her father gave her some items in a satchel to help her learn to write as he could see that his child was exceptionally clever. However, her mother disapproved:

‘My mother forced me to stop teaching myself to write. The satchel ended up being put away and I was forbidden to get it out. The state was supposed to be in charge of when you learned to read and write, and you were supposed to do it in conformist lockstep, keeping everybody safe from differences’.

Florence’s education continued to be impeded as she grew older:

‘in the working class it was a slap in the face to the expectations for girls—a threat to the established order. But with those straight-99.9 percentiles in front of me, in a dozen different academic areas, I could see that the school indeed had known this about me all along. And still they would not accommodate my needs.’

Of course times are changing and young women in many parts of the world are being encouraged to pursue the same careers as men, but sexism remains rampant hindering gifted girls. Charlotte observed upon numerous occasions that boys were given opportunities denied to girls. Her mother was the first to reinforce this gender disparity: ‘My mother was very clear that certain activities and behaviours were for boys not girls, and that it was wrong to cross those boundaries’. Teachers continued to reiterate this norm: ‘one of our grade school teachers who supervised the student crossing patrols refused to let girls be patrol guards, only boys. “You don’t send a girl to do a man’s job,” she’d say.’ This gendered division of labour was replicated at all levels of the educational system. Charlotte watched as her classmates were also thwarted: ‘one of my gifted classmates had received a full scholarship in pre-med. She wanted to be a doctor, but our school guidance counselor told her that was a man’s field; she declined the scholarship, stayed home, and became a social worker’.

Sadly, gifted girls were often shamed for their intellectual capacities and desire to pursue academic activities and even bullied into not pursuing their education. Caroline who recently graduated from high school states:

‘My mom got me tested because she felt that something was “wrong”. The results showed that I was gifted. Teachers were telling me every single day to quit. Every day, people were telling me it was impossible that I could graduate one day. Even today, I feel sad and I don’t understand. They had no right or reason to say that. My teacher, once called me to try to make me sign a paper which said that I accept to quit school.’

It seems to be a common experience amongst gifted girls growing up that their gifts are construed by their entourage not as something positive, but a burden—not only to the girl, but to her family. Using the emotional reinforcement mechanisms of guilt and fear, but in particular shame, gifted women are made to think there is something intrinsically wrong with them. Monique describes how she faced abuse from both teachers and other students:

‘I started to notice awkward glances among other people whenever I displayed my knowledge on a subject. Worst of all, I saw shame on my mom’s face when that happened: “it is not suitable for a little girl to ask so many questions”, she used to say. Some teachers told me to shut up whenever they asked us questions – they made me

feel ashamed of my knowledge. Although I had some good friends, others started calling me smart-ass, nerd, and tomboy. I believe those first years were the time when the seeds of shame, inadequacy, awkwardness and guilt were sown. During my adolescence those seeds sprouted and became an awful burden. Social pressure was unbearable for me – it was the time to be popular, to flirt, to talk nonsense, to disregard schooling but I felt I lived in another galaxy. I thought I was crazy, that something was wrong with me, and I sometimes thought that I could just die and that would be fine.’

Steffi was physically abused for not conforming to societal expectations and her giftedness was also deemed something to be ashamed for:

‘I was beaten for being loud, asking questions and generally disrupting the fragile facade of a functional family. The only reference to giftedness (the term was never used) was when IQ tests were administered in my early teens. A teacher angrily took me aside, showed me my score, and chastised me for trying to act like all the other girls. He did not explain, and so I took this to mean that there was something *else* wrong with me. Obviously I took my “keep your head down, there is something wrong with you and it’s frightening” inner story with me into adulthood. Giftedness became, for me, an unrelenting inner energy that was constantly unmet and not catalysed. That led to shame, disappointment and ultimately extreme loneliness.’

As a small child, Diane’s father said to her mother in front of her:

“I do not know where this child came from, she is so unusual”. That was the first time, I realised that I was not normal. I felt ashamed of who I was. I remember another occasion, when my mother was approached by a friend, asking her if she thought she should show me to a doctor. She relentlessly tried to convince my mother that I was not normal with a voice deeply concerned, as if I was an alien.’

Such comments led Diane to feel a profound sense of shame. Jasmine also experienced abuse for her giftedness that led her to doubt herself and be haunted by shame.

‘My parents treated me as an abnormal 'problem child'. I was often physically punished by my father, as well as verbally punished by my mother, for questioning their authority, expressing my opinion and being overly sensitive. I was also locked in my room for long periods of time, not allowed to go out of my house for months, except to school. Despite evidence that I had unusual gifts, and pleas from a few concerned teachers, I was not encouraged to pursue these further. My mother frequently called me names. I was also the victim of sexual abuse. Despite going through all this I consistently achieved high grades. I used to be very ambitious and wanted to pursue a high-flying career but I gradually lost all my confidence. I felt ashamed, abnormal and ugly’.

The shaming does not end when gifted girls reach adulthood and become gifted women. Charlotte, decided to do a degree as a mature student and struggled with an instructor who was abusive towards her on various occasions, one such time: ‘I pointed out to the instructor

and classmates some serious misrepresentations in the textbook. Instead of looking into my concern, the instructor emailed me and attempted to smart-shame me, “When you question why the authors write as they do this comes across as you are always right and everyone else is wrong.”

Such constant shaming and other punishment inevitably leads gifted girls and women to erroneously believe that there is something wrong with them, as they do not conform to the ideal held up to them. This confirms how the use of shaming in the social system tends to be highly detrimental to individual well-being. While guilt functions in the social system as an internalized penalty for a faulty action or attitude that one can overcome through corrective measures, shame is a much more insidious punitive mechanism since it implies that there is something intrinsically wrong with the person that cannot be remedied (Tangney & Dearing, 2003, Heylighen et al. 2018). For example, Philippa’s exceptional performance at school entailed that she was frequently subject to specialised assessments:

‘I thought I was being pulled out of class for testing or covert placement in upper grades because I was doing something wrong. My greatest effort was following rules so that I wouldn’t be moved out of my classroom. Ostracism was imposed externally by pulling me away from their peers and internally, I kept thinking: there’s something wrong with me, I’m not like my peers’.

Teachers insisting on such assessments should have utilized the results to encourage further educational opportunities, but instead the assessments may become a source of shame and distress to the gifted. Helena recounts:

‘My teacher told my mother that I was retarded (that was the word she used) although I had unusual spelling capacities. We went to get an assessment. The psychologist ran tests on me and he found out that I had a high IQ and because of my serious issues with the authority (aka the teacher), he suggested a different school for me, the Montessori school. That was impossible because there was only one Montessori school in my country and it was in a different province. Thereafter, I had to fight with the “stigma” of a mental disorder for no matter what the assessment said, I grew up with my parents thinking of me as a child with special needs.’

In addition to being shamed, gifted girls and women were often bullied because of their inability or lack of desire to conform to the norms. Carla states that ‘as a young child I felt different from other kids, social expectations didn't make sense to me and I was bullied at school’. Diane also reports: ‘I was bullied because I was different, so I started acting like others and became a very troubled student. This led to me being expelled from school for a few weeks which led to a range of physical and emotional abuse at home from my father who kept asking me why I wasn't ashamed of myself’. Rita states, ‘my rural small town did not look kindly on my giftedness; I was dealt with typical mockery and exclusion’. Jessica’s original ideas and unusual intelligence entailed she was frequently labelled as ‘weird’ and a ‘freak’ by her classmates.

In response to the punitive shaming, bullying and other negative reinforcements, gifted girls and women quickly learn to hide their gifts, to blend in as they try to tune into what others expect of them. In so doing, they usually sacrifice their own intellectual, creative and related needs and goals. Fleur relates, ‘I just didn’t fit the normal standard, so I copied it. And the more normal I was, the more happy people were. The need to be a part of the group is pretty strong’. Fleur kept thinking ‘I really need to figure out what’s wrong with me, then I can find a way to fix it, or learn to compensate the behaviour by reading about it’. Monique also experienced the constant need to conform and was dissuaded from her studies in favour of behaviour deemed typical of a young woman ‘I felt pressure from all sides to be normal – in those years I was constantly being told, from friends, from my parents, from the lady in the grocer’s shop: “get yourself a boyfriend”’. Judy notes ‘I have often felt out-of-place and have learned not to speak my mind. I used to talk about my intellectual ideas, but often I felt no one could understand. I remember one woman laughing at me and shutting me down. I felt deeply ashamed and freakish.’

Lourena developed a system so as to escape notice and keep authority figures happy:

‘I started to see through adults, noting what they want you to see and what they want to hide, and realising how fragile, weak, and lost they really are. I developed a habit of trying to have their “lotto numbers” ready ahead of time, so that I can swipe them just in time, when they are needed. I register how everyone is, where they are headed, where they will want to go next. I provide them with unambiguous, timely coordinates, so that they feel safe and on track. Any amount of “giftedness” may get easily consumed if your mind operates like this.’

Gifted girls and women often place other people’s needs ahead of their own in order to conform. Charlotte stated, ‘it’s a daily struggle to focus and refocus back onto what I need to be doing because when I was growing up nothing was about what I needed. My parents’ wishes came first, then whatever my mother was focusing on, third was whatever concerned my brothers, then I could focus on school, then work, then boyfriends.’

Rita echoed a similar experience:

‘in family life, in most interpersonal situations, I default to assisting others. I don’t allow myself to express all the aspects of my giftedness because that would mean

making my work, art, thoughts, my needs a priority over others. Having young children reinforced that others come before me. For most parents, that's a temporary and goal-specific behavior. For me, it is a continuation of a lifelong behavior. I simply have no practice placing my needs over others'. I lack that skill. I think specific experiences have reinforced the historical perspective that women can best use their gifts as "the power behind the throne."

Monique, also succumbed to putting what people wanted her to do, rather than what she wanted to do, first. She had been continually told to 'get a boyfriend' and settle down, eventually she did just that, 'I got myself a boyfriend, I married and I had two beautiful, gifted sons. In the process, I moved to another town, I quit my job and abandoned a promising career at the Central Administration, and forgot my dreams of becoming a writer. I was completely detached from my inner nature, because I thought that way I would be happy, just like other people were. But I wasn't'. Fleur gave up her dreams of pursuing a philosophy degree as it was not deemed appropriate by her family. She was encouraged to settle down, get married and have children, which she did. Jasmine and Diane both chose not to have children in order to follow their intellectual ambitions and acquire post-graduate education. Both reported frequently receiving negative reactions from outsiders due to the fact that in their thirties they still had no children and people constantly queried their decision. In fact Jasmine stated 'my mother and father even went so far as to complain recently in their yearly Christmas letter sent out to family and friends that I "remain resolutely childless" focusing on my lack of children as opposed to my academic achievements. I was also told by three family members that I would not be a proper woman until I had given birth.'

Another pattern we noted was the prescription of pharmaceuticals to gifted girls and women, which were believed by medical practitioners to be the solution for their behaviour, anxieties or unhappiness with an unstimulating job or other lack of self-actualisation, but were in fact a result of a social system that did not recognise their cognitive abilities and sought to dampen their behaviour. Anna stated: 'I took Ritalin for years believing that my unhappiness symptoms were due to ADHD'. Caroline shared this experience 'I went through misdiagnosis years ago and was prescribed 30mg methylphenidate per day'. Fleur was also prescribed Ritalin for her behaviour, 'in spring of 2015 I decided to quit the medication. I realised it wasn't ADHD, as much as it was a side-effect of my intelligence', whilst Jasmine 'was prescribed rounds of anti-depressants from tricyclic anti-depressants to SSRIS but they just made me feel deadened. When I finally got a job where my intellect was valued and employed, rather than wasted, I realised that that was all I had needed (and had previously been denied) my entire life.'

Diane explained 'my entire experience of growing up a profoundly gifted girl in a very conservative, hierarchical and sexist environment left me with abuses ranging from emotional, physical and sexual.' Charlotte was continually infantilised into adulthood, 'I've usually been treated like (and sometimes called) an ignorant "little girl." I have no problem with identifying myself as a girl because I think girls are amazing. But I have issues with people who have an erroneous, negative stereotype of girls.' Rita 'experienced polite sexism. Male students would ignore my words in class discussion; when they repeated my point in their own words, class would move on'.

Ellen, who describes herself as ‘a woman of visible African descent’, stated ‘I am a member of MENSA with an IQ of 147. However, on a daily basis I experience some form or another of either racism or sexism that is mostly in the form of gross underestimation of my talents and abilities.’ Ellen has displayed her talents in her workplace but ‘when I finally achieved what I thought would get me the recognition and respect I had more than earned, for accomplishing the impossible, I was ostracized, reduced to working in the background, shut out of meetings, and ignored. No one wanted to ever give me credit for that level of accomplishment again. I was assigned to a man whom I was told would communicate all of my ideas in meetings and to groups’.

Sylvia managed to get an excellent job in a renowned blue-chip corporation. She explains, ‘I assumed I would be treated equally. This was so far from the truth that half way through my training I borrowed clothes from one of the boys, drew on a moustache, tied my hair back and went in as a man. I quickly realised that there was only one way to succeed around there: the male way’. She was dissuaded from applying for overseas projects, which implicitly suggested that her superiors wanted her to adhere to the domesticated stereotype of femininity. Staff attempted to discourage her with comments such ‘it’s a bit rough for a woman’ or ‘your husband wouldn’t want to be posted overseas as an expat partner.’ Even when Sylvia excelled at her job she was told ‘yes you do seem to have achieved and exceeded all your targets – somehow – but we just don’t see leadership potential. You never shout in meetings or lose your temper or show your strength’. Sylvia concluded ‘the male managers could only understand one style of leadership and assumed that our achievements must be based on witchcraft or sexual favours’.

Jeannine also experienced sexism in the corporate world ‘I have degrees from two Ivy-League universities, one a PhD, and have won various awards too. I have failed to be properly recognised by my male peers. I have routinely been paid a smaller salary compared to the men on an equal rung in the organisations I have worked for, even though many had less qualifications, and presented less unusual and novel solutions.’ Jeannine experienced an incessant undermining of her talents and skills on a daily basis and her hard work was consistently unrewarded as compared to her male colleagues. Often at company meetings, when she presented her ideas to an almost exclusively male team they were refuted on the basis of her gender, but when male colleagues presented them in a subsequent meeting, claiming them as their own ideas, despite their obvious origins, they were lauded and implemented. Jeannine was unable to bear with the constant sabotage and succumbed to the pressure through self-destructive outlets ‘this made me begin to doubt myself and my abilities. I began drinking heavily. I became an alcoholic eventually and ended up in hospital. I had to go into rehab.’

Many women even when breaking through the glass ceiling continued to face judgment for not matching societal expectations. Women’s successes, replicating their experiences as girls, instead of being seen as positive were a cause for concern in terms of what was considered an appropriate trajectory for women. As a young adult Monique’s achievements and intelligence was deemed a danger. As she says, ‘the question I heard over and over again was, “How will she ever get a husband?”’ For Diane, Jasmine and others who chose to put their ambitions first, the refrain was ‘why is she so focused on her career and not making a family?’

Sexism and underestimation of talents was ridiculous at times. Helena describes ‘I applied to an Ivy League university. My boyfriend suggested that I should also apply to other universities because Ivy League, he said “is for very clever people”. I felt deeply disappointed. He knew me for five years. I didn’t brag about my degrees but surely he could see that books were the extension of my hands.’ It did not end there, years later Helena, now studying at an Ivy League university, met a schoolmate whilst visiting her hometown for Christmas, ‘he asked me what I was doing and when I told him that I was doing my doctorate at X he laughed in my face and demanded that I showed him my university card to prove it’. Neither did Helena’s parents appreciate their daughter’s accomplishments ‘they hid that I was studying at X, firstly because they didn’t even know what it was and secondly because even when I explained it to them my parents thought that nobody would ever believe them. I still don’t even know if they believe me’.

Even when sexism wasn’t explicit, gifted girls and women soon picked up that it was implicit. For example Sylvia recalls ‘I was raised with the expectation that I could do whatever I wanted. However I was also raised to not have nor express strong opinions and not be big-headed. It turns out these are unhelpful attributes in the corporate world.’ Charlotte was told by her mother ““You could be anything you want,” but she treated me like I couldn’t do anything and shouldn’t even try’.

An accumulation of negative experiences, such as those detailed above, causes gifted girls and women to put into doubt their capabilities. Jamila states ‘Despite all my achievements I still doubt myself all the time and often can’t speak my mind, only write my thoughts. I spent much of my life feeling stupid, guilty and ashamed. Sometimes I wonder whether I am just stupid and an impostor but other times I realise that I can remember and understand things that 95% of people around me are unable to.’ Caroline reported ‘I started a bachelors program last summer and I was astonished to note that I had doubts about myself even when I had the best grade and then I noted how those who had bad marks acted as if they were kings of the world. I dropped out two months later’. Because of work-related negative reinforcement, Jeannine who has degrees from two Ivy-League universities, including a PhD, states ‘sometimes I think I am stupid but yet all my degrees show that I am not’. Some women prefer to deny that they are intelligent and appropriate the negative terms they have been lambasted with over the course of their life, such as Helena who states, ‘I prefer being called “different” or “weirdo”. I am fine with these words after all these years. They don’t do anything to me. I am aware of what I am and I don’t care what other people say, I have an opinion of my own, thank you. The term “gifted” isolates me. Again’. Several have had struggles accepting their giftedness, a common occurrence among the gifted (Jacobsen, 2000). Fleur spent her entire life thinking that she had a psychological disorder, unable to accept that she was intelligent. When her son was born and later displayed exceptional cognitive abilities, his kindergarten teachers suggested an assessment. He was diagnosed as gifted. Fleur came to a realisation: ‘Imagine that—it was easier for me to think that I had ADHD, Asperger’s, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, and anything else I could think of, rather than thinking: hey, have you ever considered you are just as smart as your son?’

As Storek’s (2011) work on the ‘hubris-humility effect’ reveals, women in general tend to underestimate their cognitive abilities while men frequently overestimate their own abilities,

a gender difference found also among highly gifted individuals. As such, her findings and those of others who have investigated the correlation of gender and self-estimation, support our interpretation that gender-based stereotypes and beliefs affect self-evaluation and self-enhancement, entailing self-derogatory biases in women and the concomitant gender differences in achievement, attitudes and ability (Storek 2011:346, see also Ackerman & Wolman, 2007; Bleeker & Jacobs, 2004; Chamorro-Premuzic & Arteche, 2008; Carr et al., 2008; Else-Quest, Hyde & Linn, 2010; Guimond et al., 2006; Kwan et al., 2008; Lytton & Romney, 1991).

A more extreme instance of this self-doubt is the impostor syndrome, which is common amongst gifted women—as confirmed by Bell (1990) and by the testimonies we collected. The impostor syndrome is defined as the ‘doubting and discrediting of one’s abilities and achievements’ (ibid.:61). High achievers suffering from this syndrome believe that their success is the result of fortuitous circumstances, such as the right contacts, as opposed to actual talent. These “impostors” assume that they are frauds who have “tricked” everyone into thinking that they have exceptional abilities, or who have managed to slip through the system through sheer luck. As Young points out, the impostor syndrome prevents women ‘from fully enjoying their success and seizing opportunities, and can cause them to overwork to compensate for supposed deficiencies’ (Young 2011). Nobody is perfect—as the expression goes ‘to err is human’—, but those who suffer from impostor syndrome generally have such high self-expectations that when they make the slightest mistake they see it as a confirmation of what they knew all along: that they are frauds. Impostor feelings combine fear, guilt and shame, three of the key emotions we have proposed that the social system uses to control individuals. Fear functions to prevent gifted women from pursuing their ambitions, as they are afraid of being ‘found out’ as frauds. Fleur described her ‘inner soul and talent’ as ‘hidden behind fear’, whilst Kristie, struggling with the emotion herself, concluded ‘we need to let go of the fear—because fear is so powerful and blocks any growth’. Gifted women experiencing impostor syndrome often feel guilt because they believe that they are lying or hiding their deficiencies, which as Young (2011) points out, may cause them to overwork to atone for a presumed failing. Shame deeply haunted many of the gifted women we interviewed. In fact, many assumed they had only acquired their qualifications and position through luck but were ultimately defective and would not be able to move forward in their lives due to these deficiencies.

Social System Programming: Controlling Gifted Women

The previous section has illustrated several of the numerous problems gifted women are faced with and how fear, guilt and in particular shame tend to inhibit their self-actualisation. To recapitulate, growing up, gifted girls were often dissuaded from pursuing their educational goals, whilst observing boys given opportunities denied to them. Many of them were shamed for their intellectual capacities, and this even extended into adulthood. Through the emotional reinforcement mechanisms of fear, guilt and shame, they were led to believe that there was something inherently wrong with them. Of all the negative emotions, shame was the one most frequently experienced. As gifted females were punished, excluded or ridiculed for not conforming to the norms, they chose to try to hide their gifts and abilities, to try to blend in, echoing Foucault's sentiment that 'visibility is a trap' (1995:200) or Ovid's maxim '*bene vixit*,

bene qui latuit'. Due to their upbringing they often chose to put others' needs above their own, thus sacrificing their personal development. They frequently experienced sexism. Most suffered from self-doubt and some from the impostor syndrome.

It is clear that a large part of these negative experiences stem from the norms of the social system that portray the role of women as inherently incompatible with the kind of intellectual pursuits that attract gifted women. A quote from a female rocket scientist interviewed for a different study summarizes the problem: 'I had to put psychological blinders on, and not listen to the external stuff, because before the external stuff had been wrong for me. Those of us who made it are those who learned to ignore society's traditional expectations of women' (Reis, 2002). A deconstruction of the ideologies that are sex and gender may elucidate where these oppressive expectations come from.

As stated, it is necessary to eschew the notion of sex and gender as universal constants that are inherent to an ontic reality, and study their structural properties. A social system rests upon symbolic, imaginary paradigms that are presumed to be 'models of reality' (see Wittgenstein 2016:27). Yet upon closer examination these are not so much 'models of reality' but 'models for reality' (see Geertz 1973). It is not our view of the world and ourselves as beings within it that colours our paradigms and our beliefs. Rather it is the belief in such paradigms that colours our view of the world and ourselves as beings within it. Our bodies and the worlds they inhabit are 'conceptualised and organised by labels and categories that... stand in the way of any direct experience' (Žižek 2012:3). As Putnam postulates, we have no means of accessing a language independent-reality¹ (Putnam 1981). The 'raw' reality of existence is thus never tangible but always transmogrified by the symbolic structures of the social system, which determine, locate and shape the self and its position in the world.

The social system renders human beings into subjects and objects ready to be used as tools to perpetuate the social system, ensuring its values and economies remain intrinsically unmodified, thereby supporting the system's continuing autopoiesis. Within the social system, individuals are objectified, divided and categorised (see Foucault 1975). Actions are standardised and individuals are organised and normalised. Deviations from the norms are met with punishment. To perpetuate the social system, bodies must be malleable, docile and willing to work to reproduce the system. Within the predominant social systems, the role of 'woman' is primarily to reproduce: to give birth to beings so as to that ensure that the labour force of the social system is repopulated with an abundant, ongoing supply of individuals, thus safeguarding the social system's survival.

Our languages and the concomitant symbolic systems of meaning inherent to the social system are organised upon a binary system of classification. Through this system of perceived 'opposites or contrasts, the mind builds up its perceptions of the world' (Maccormack and Strathern 1980:2), and this 'perception becomes definition' (Heidegger 2010:16). In the symbolic system that dominates Europe, North America and most other parts of the world, it is assumed that two genders exist that correlate with two sexes: male and female. This binary is implicitly heterosexual and is predicated upon specific conceptions of

¹ Derrida expressed a similar idea when he stated 'I speak only one language and it is not my own' (Derrida 1998).

genitalia which inform the ways in which bodies are imagined. Endemic to this binary gender system is the belief in a 'mimetic relation of gender to sex' where gender reflects sex and is thereby restricted by it (Butler 1990:9). Within language, individuals cannot be signified without the mark of gender (Wittig 1985). Butler states that 'gender is a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts' (Butler 1990:14). She proposes that it is a 'persistent impersonation' that manipulates precisely because 'it passes as real' (ibid:xxx). The dichotomy of male vs. female is not only very narrow in its conceptualization of an infinitely diverse reality, but intrinsically constraining, as it does not allow options other than those two. This model for reality makes it possible for beings to be instrumentalised and policed according to a specific discourse that privileges reproduction and division of people according to reproductive functions (see Foucault 1976). Specific roles or behaviours are expected from males and females. Beings that do not fit within this dichotomous framework jeopardise its coherence, and the survival of the social system. These beings are thus deemed anomalies that must be 'corrected' to make them align with the model and fit into the social system.

Human beings are taught from birth that behaviours, acts and performances are expected to follow choreographed cultural conventions, which make gender and sex unequivocally legible. Mimesis of such behaviours allows for the cultural production and propagation of these gendered identities over space and time and within the social system. This serves as a regulatory mechanism for societal control. De Beauvoir's oft-cited phrase that '*on ne naît pas femme, on le devient*', is predicated upon this argument (1949:301).

Sex and gender are relational constructs: male and female only gain meaning through their opposition to one another. They are assumed in most Western discourses, resonant with Kantian methodology, to define a universal dichotomy. This binary opposition is paired with others in the symbolic order. Philosophers, feminists and anthropologists have shown how Western languages, cultural as well as academic discourses and thus Western noesis, have been erected upon this dyad. This dichotomy is intrinsically limited and misleading by ignoring other conceptions of gender, such as First Nation notions of two-spirit (Jacobs et al. 1997), where gender is not limited to an either/or, male or female paradigm, but can be both. Western discourse historically also tends to promote "phallogocentric" models that place the male above the female in binary hierarchies. "Phallogocentrism" is a portmanteau term coalescing logocentrism and phallogocentrism, coined by philosopher Jacques Derrida. He defines it as: 'the system of metaphysical oppositions' inherent to the construction of meaning (1978: 20) whose telos is 'masculinist' and 'patriarchal'. The ubiquitous entitlement of the masculine within the symbolic system of signification is visible across academic disciplines. Freud, for example (1976[1933]) interpreted the phallus as a symbol of power. His concept of penis envy was predicated upon the female lack of a phallus. (As an effective rejoinder, here is another quote from one of our gifted women testimonies: 'I was quite young when I first heard the term penis envy. I thought at the time, "Who would envy that? Floppy bit of nonsense, gets in the way, pants don't fit right, highly sensitive to pain. Not exactly an asset!'"')

Lévi-Strauss using Saussurian structural semiotics to study non-Western mythologies created a phallogocentric, anthropological discourse based upon dualisms, positing that analogous

pairs such as female-male, nature-culture, raw-cooked, passive-active—where the male side always presented the superior side of the binary—were intrinsic to all cultural systems and presented a value-free, timeless model reflecting fundamental truths intrinsic to the human mind (Lévi-Strauss 1964). Ortner (1995) has written extensively on the female-male/nature-culture model. She postulates that females and males are at birth equal, but that women have been universally relegated to a subordinate status in relation to men as a result of cultural structures that become naturalised in the social system, namely the female-male/ nature-culture dichotomy, where the category of culture is seen as superior to nature. Such a symbolic system, as we have seen, conditions our experience of everyday life by posing as a model for reality. Culture, an active component within this belief system, is seen as a means to subjugate passive nature. Ortner posits that females have long been associated with nature, whilst men are coupled with culture. Women, states Ortner, have been paired with the concept of nature due to their biological abilities and attributes. Organs and their functions, such as breasts, menstruation and the ability to give birth, are deemed to serve solely for the act of bearing and rearing children. Men's roles are seen to extend outside the domestic sphere, where they create enduring objects and subjects, such as art and religion. In the Western model, with its Judaeo-Christian and industrial underpinnings, culture is believed to be superior to nature. Men, associated with culture, are thereby deemed superior to women (Ardener 1975). The wild-tame and raw-cooked dichotomies align with this structural configuration. Much as culture renders nature docile, men according to this model, are believed to 'tame' women, rendering them less wild, as in the infamous play by William Shakespeare *The Taming of the Shrew* where a sharp-tongued, wilful heroine named Kate is rendered compliant by Petruchio and turned into an 'ideal wife'². Much as the wild becomes tame and thereby controllable, the raw is only edible once cooked and the female only subdued once cultured by the male. Haraway states that such 'troubling dualisms...have been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women' (1991:177).

The flaws inherent to the nature-culture model are obvious. Firstly, it is ethnocentric and cannot be deemed universal, as concepts such as culture and nature are socio-cultural constructs variable across time and space. It may be that 'woman's body and her specialized reproduction function make her appear closer to nature' (Moore, 1994:15) but in reality this is a cultural construction that is only learned through socialisation. Nature and culture are loaded concepts borne from Western discourse but which may have no coherent equivalents amongst other socio-cultural groups. For example, nature is conceived of in very different ways by the peoples of the Arctic, who do not possess a concept of 'wilderness' (Klein et al. 2001). Gender and sex thus should not be viewed as primordial concepts but as 'the product of social doings' (West and Zimmerman 1987:128).

The body becomes a medium through which the cultural and societal values of the social system are inscribed (Foucault 1957:148-153). The anthropologist Douglas notes that bodies are demarcated so as to implement rules, codes and taboos, and thus protect cultural

² At the end of the play, a now docile Kate demonstrates her submission to her husband in this telling soliloquy: 'I asham'd that women are so simple, To offer war where they should kneel for peace, Or seek for rule, supremacy, and sway, When they are bound to serve, love, and obey. Why are our bodies soft, and weak, and smooth, Unapt to toil and trouble in the world, But that our soft conditions, and our hearts, Should well agree with our external parts?' (Shakespeare 1929, Act V, Scene II)

discourse. 'Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose a system on an inherently untidy experience' to create a 'semblance of order' (Douglas 1969:4).

Gender activities, as Butler has argued, are performative and dependent upon the context. Rousseau noted that through language and culture, men became removed from nature (Rousseau 1755), but ironically, in Western society it is the females we perceive as 'wild' women, identified with nature, who are primarily responsible for rearing children. It is women who socialise children and take them from a 'raw' state of 'wild' 'nature' to a 'tame', 'cooked', 'cultured' product. Thus, using the logic inherent to this flawed model, women merge, mediate and reconcile opposites (Maccormack 1980:9). What is furthermore interesting in this model is that all categories, nature-culture/wild-tame/raw-cooked/passive-active are transformative, except female-male which remains immutable. This inflexibility reflects that prescribed by the social system. Ultimately this model must be discarded and only its deconstruction is useful to understand the deeper mechanisms of the social system and its symbolic ordering.

In the Western world, the nature-culture/female-male model affects the way men and women are expected to behave and interact with their surroundings. According to this paradigm, women are most useful to the social system when they focus on the domestic setting and the maternal behaviours associated with this milieu and often with 'nature'. Women are expected to bear children and thus perpetuate the social system and not focus on other tasks that might distract them from this role. Yet, gifted women routinely stray from this prescription. They show that women's roles within society need not be circumscribed to the 'nature' role stipulated by the social system. Their life choices, interests and pursuits tend to focus on subjects that rather align with the 'culture' part of the model, typically identified within the symbolic system as reserved for males. Many gifted women, as we have seen, do not desire a life that prioritises the domestic area. They prefer to immerse themselves in studies and/or pursue ambitious careers. Their primary motivation and *raison d'être* may not be to have children and earn an income so as to provide for their children; they may wish to have children and pursue a high-flying career or not to have children. Their conduct frequently disharmonises with that prescribed by the cultural mores of the social system.

Let us recall some of the primary traits particular to gifted individuals and which we have seen evinced in the testimonies of gifted women in this paper. The gifted have advanced capacities of reasoning and problem solving (Davidson 1986, Sternberg 1986) and an intense drive to acquire knowledge and learn (Bloom 1982, Freeman 1985), while setting themselves ambitious goals (Winner 1996). They have a tendency towards over-excitability (Dabrowski 1972, Dabrowski and Piechowski 1977). They tend to question rules and authorities and often hold unconventional views (Schetkey 1981, Sebring 1983, Whitmore 1980). Such behaviours might be deemed inappropriate in any individual. However when we examine these characteristics in relation to the nature-culture/passive-active model that is the stanchion of the social system, it is clear that girls and women in particular would be subject to criticism for displaying such active, culture-focused attitudes. According to the model, females are expected to be meek and passive, rather than intensely driven, over-excitabile or ambitious. They are supposed to favour the concrete issues of the domestic realm above the

pursuit of knowledge or the abstract reasoning that is associated with the masculine sphere. Likewise they should not challenge the *status quo* or privilege ambitious goals that relegate the domestic sphere to a secondary or a tangential realm of interest. To conclude, the characteristics of the gifted align far more fluidly with a cultural setting that is traditionally considered the domain of the male.

Gifted girls and women who step out of their passive role in the domestic sphere are therefore frequently identified as invaders of what is envisioned in the symbolic system as a male sphere. They become conspicuous disturbances that menace the autopoiesis of the social system and its values. Through mechanisms of neural and emotional conditioning they must be made into something that can be used to perpetuate rather than jeopardise the system (Heylighen et al., in press).

Implicitly, the ‘model for reality’ that the social system promotes becomes so deeply internalised and entrenched as a ‘model of reality’ that for the beings that are immersed in it, it becomes not only a descriptive mechanism but a moralising model that acts as an apparatus of surveillance. As already pointed out, the symbolic order objectifies individuals, divides them and classifies them. But it also makes these same individuals subject others, and ultimately themselves, to objectification, division, and classification. Anomalies that deviate from the standardised prescriptions are excluded, suppressed or normalised by individuals within the social system so as to render the transgressor, and their actions, innocuous. Gifted women, who are perceived as posing a threat to the symbolic structure of society, must also be normalised. Other individuals, who have learnt to obey the social system’s norms, therefore punish these women for deviating from the norms by inducing fear, guilt and shame into them.

Fear of negative reactions makes gifted women afraid to express themselves and inclined to hide their gifts. Guilt makes them seek to atone for their supposed ‘misbehaviour’ by performing acts that run contrary to their actual desires, such as accepting the peer pressure to conform, get married and have children whilst giving up a high-flying job—as we saw with Monique. Shame is the most deleterious of the social system’s emotional control mechanisms. Shame makes people feel both physically and mentally small, vulnerable and powerless to achieve their goals. Therefore gifted women suffering from shame will not dare to challenge the social system, but instead submit to it and conform to its demands. But while guilt can be redeemed by performing certain actions, shame suggests that innate “shortcomings” render one unworthy of respect or support. This reduces those experiencing shame to an enduring position of subordination where they slavishly try to match the norms, so as to pre-empt the risk of derision, humiliation or ostracism. Our research evinces that many gifted women suffer from a heightened sense of shame. Shame is one of the most powerful suppressors of self-actualisation, and the source of a wide range of pathologies, including low self-esteem, dropping out of education, depression, anxiety, drug abuse, psychosis, and suicide (Lewis, 1995; Tangney & Dearing, 2003). It may explain why so many gifted women fail to achieve their academic and creative goals despite their remarkable cognitive abilities. Shame causes women to dismiss or hide their abilities to such a degree that they cannot realize their potential. And even when they do, they are likely to suffer from impostor syndrome (Clance & O’Toole, 1987), believing that their success is due purely to

luck, and that sooner or later, when their intrinsic deficiencies are exposed, they will be shamed into admitting that they really are frauds.

Conclusion

We have tried to better understand the factors that prevent gifted women from fully developing their talents, by asking them to report the difficulties they personally experienced, and by interpreting these observations in terms of our general model (Heylighen et al., in press) of how social systems impose their norms on individuals, and of a more specific analysis of the norms that the predominant system imposes on women. Given the broad range of ages and nationalities in the sample of women that sent us their testimonies, these personal statements seem to reflect the experience of a large segment of gifted females—although it is as yet difficult to say in how far that segment is representative of gifted women as a whole. Let us summarize the patterns that seem to recur throughout the testimonies.

Gifted women routinely face negative reactions to their behaviour, which is deemed anomalous by the social system in that it deviates from the system's norms. These norms prescribe more passive, docile, and less assertive roles for women, preferably staying within the domestic sphere of caring for children and family. Gifted women, on the other hand, typically are driven to actively and autonomously explore intellectual domains and to be creative. This results in negative reactions that lead these women to alter their behaviour, goals and priorities so as to align these with the demands of the social system. This leads many gifted girls and women to abandon their intellectual or creative pursuits, thus hindering them in achieving self-actualisation.

The suppression of “anomalous” behaviour takes place primarily through processes of shaming, as well as inducing guilt and fear. Shame is the most insidious of these emotional control mechanisms: whilst guilt can be atoned for and fear can be avoided by circumventing angst-producing situations, shaming leads women to believe there is something inherently and irreparably wrong with them. Shame is at the origin of many mental ailments, hinders self-confidence and self-belief, and thereby impedes the ability to realise one's goals and visions. The negative reinforcements experienced by our sample of gifted females were varied, including:

- punishment and abuse, verbal and/or physical, for not behaving according to the norms;
- passive or active dissuasion from academic or professional pursuits and often, concomitantly, encouragement of domestic activities, such as prioritising marriage and child-bearing.
- use of negative labels, such as ‘weird’, to characterize them and their behaviours;
- a priori disbelief that they are capable of achieving their ambitions;
- ignoring or dismissing ideas they propose, while often welcoming similar ideas proposed by less gifted males.

Such recurrent negative feedback gives gifted girls and women the message that they are stupid, abnormal, deviant or bad, thus inciting them to feel ashamed, guilty, and fearful of

repercussions. Such feelings in turn can bring about a plethora of harmful effects, from depression and general dissatisfaction with life to drug and alcohol abuse. These emotional and neural programming mechanisms form part of the general methods of control used by the social system to ensure its autopoiesis (Heylighen et al., in press). From the perspective of the social system, it is less hazardous for an individual to self-destruct than to undermine the model of reality that supports the system's continued existence.

If gifted women are subject to such reactions, we believe it is because their behaviour does not fit in with the expectations of the social system. Because of their tendency to favour intellectual challenges outside the domestic field, they endanger the coherence of the female-male/nature-culture imagined binary upon which the social system rests. They demonstrate that there are other ways of being a 'woman', or perhaps just 'being'. This in turn not only 'contests the place and authority of the masculine position' (Butler 1990), but also disturbs the symbolic order, *ergo* menacing its very existence and that of those who belong to it. Gender is 'always a doing' there is no pre-existing gender identity behind the doer (Butler 1990:34). Gender is an idea that must be generated and propagated for the social system to maintain its organization. The body is 'synecdochal for the social system' (Butler 1990:181). The social system requires that this body, like the system itself, is imagined as stable and coherent. In order for the social system to retain its power and control over individuals it is necessary that they not only internalise psychically but also embody physically the strictures of the model.

Guilt, shame and related sentiments function as a means of control and manipulation to render people obedient so that they are useful to the social system. As we have previously proposed (Heylighen et al. 2018) the social system in order to assure its survival uses and 'regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise' (Foucault 1991:188). Individuals are taught to discipline and police the behaviour not only of others, but of themselves, by spreading, extolling and enforcing the prescriptions inherent in the symbolic paradigm.

As Heidegger (2010), Hegel (1977), Sartre (1943) *inter alia* have described, individuals within society do not 'belong to themselves' but to 'others' through whom they acquire self-knowledge, and experience their world and themselves within it. As a member of society, a human being—what Heidegger termed a 'being-in-the-world'—is *ipso facto* a *mitsein*, a 'being-with' (Heidegger 2010:114-130), or what Sartre called a 'being-for-others' (Sartre 1943:30). It is only through interactions with others that as selves we come to be constituted and it is through the 'other...present to me everywhere as the one through whom I become an object' that social emotions such as guilt and shame arise (Sartre 1943:373). As we have seen the social system requires that women, who have been allotted the prime responsibility for the production of future generations of workers be docile, rather than overly inquisitive and do not question the *status quo* thus destabilising it. As such, the social system favours 'averageness and levelling down' (Heidegger 2010:123). Subjects within this system are to pay constant attention to the way in which they differ from other subjects and overt differences are to be suppressed not only in others but also in oneself through mechanisms such as shaming, guilt and fear.

All self-knowledge is constantly derived through the other, and a positive self-image is predicated upon acceptance by the other. Acceptance by the other entails being recognised as a useful, productive individual in society. In order to achieve such acknowledgement gifted women have learnt that they must behave in accordance with the prescriptions of the social system. We saw this in the testimonies, where several respondents, such as Lourena, Monique or Fleur, sought to please others. But to achieve this they had to guess what these others wanted from them, invoking the constant question which Lacan has referred to of a self that seeks approval from others '*que me veut-il?*'(Lacan 2014:6).

Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise. As we have demonstrated in this paper disciplinarian means such as shame, guilt and fear have repressed the abilities of gifted women, entailing that in the majority of cases their capacity for self-actualisation has been blunted.

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