

# **SOCIAL STANDS AGAINST CONCEPTUAL INNOVATIONS IN GIFTEDNESS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**The new conceptualisations about intelligence and creativity hardly have incidence in our society (school, family, mass-media, and others). What are the elements that make up a «sociocultural barrier» which obstructs the social penetration of new advances about giftedness? What's thinking tendencies settled an ideology so hard to modify? We will analyse the archetypes and the evolution of intelligence notions in the occidental culture as a possible reason of social difficulty about modifying conceptions.**

## **SOCIAL STANDS AGAINST CONCEPTUAL INNOVATIONS IN GIFTEDNESS**

### **Introduction**

**In previous works we have analysed stereotypes and prejudices about giftedness, whereas they are thought forms that difficult the understanding of son/daughter or pupil by themselves (Martínez, 1998, 1999). Once labeled, and, unfortunately, labeled not always well, who surround the gifted one attributes a group of problematic characteristics associated to the stereotype that previously they have on giftedness (Martínez & Castiglione, 1998; Castelló & Martínez, 2000). Everybody knows the effect Rosenthal, the Pygmalion effect, the expectations usually have consequences in the behavior of the other that tends to behave as they expected from him (Rogers, 1982).**

**To analyze, to classify the forms of stereotypes or prejudices widely extended on the giftedness and the talent, have not provided tools that allow us to promote a conceptual change, at least, between the professionals of the education. Demythologize ideas rooted in a culture, more felt than thought, needs something more than a good argumentation. We are talking about changing beliefs and attitudes more than changing thoughts. Beliefs are easily confirmed, through an isolated case or an article of sensationalist press.**

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## Objectives

This work is, first of all, an attempt to understand where are the origins of these beliefs in our culture, how the mythological thought survives and how it is transmitted in form of folk wisdom, impregnated of moral connotations and laws nonwritten. We asked why the giftedness and the talent and, consequently, concepts like creativity and intelligence, have been so influenced by fenomenological thinking trends or quasi-magical trends, and has been so difficult to advance in its conceptualización.

Because we are talking about demythologize, we have examined the greco-roman myths, what parts of them remains in our culture, what forms have taken and what is the process by which the myth loses its quality of truth (Serious, 1985; Vernant, 1971). We also have been talking about beliefs; therefore, we have reviewed how the Christian version of the Judaism considers the exceptional thinking.

Doubtlessly, the knowledge that comes from other sciences (anthropology, philosophy, history, etc.) has been naturalized psychologically, that is to say, interpreted from the frame of psychology. It is an attempt to reconstruct the history that is behind the prejudice and the stereotype, to understand how it has been constructed a socio-historical baggage hardly conscious that marks an ideology (system of beliefs) respect to the intellectual exceptional nature and that implies that some concepts are accepted quickly like truth, whereas others are rejected because they contradict the pre-established system of beliefs.

## The Formation of Prejudices and Stereotypes. Categorical and Attributional Processes

Often, when we identify the cognitives qualities of the human being, we give excessive importance to reasoning forms that we could qualify of conscious and logics. But in any process of problem solving or decision taking take part, in addition to knowledge and logical reasoning, prejudices, attitudes, values, beliefs and emotions (not always conscious) that modifies our perception of the physical and social surroundings, and, therefore, our ideas and decisions.

Social Psychology has studied with detail this type of processes that influence remarkably in our behavior (Doise, Deschamps and Mugny, 1985). We have to understand that the categorization and attribution processes that are behind the prejudice or the attitude are a natural form to simplify complex surroundings and, often, incomprehensible. Also, since we have been talking about emotional components, the rationalization that we can process *a posteriori* to justify a certain attitude or behavior towards something or somebody is born as a resource to the anxiety that causes what is strange or, simply, as a control of internal impulses that are unacceptable, like the aggressiveness.

The values usually are shared with the sociocultural group we belong; therefore, usually they are not resisted unless it appears another group with values and attitudes different from ours. Attitudes and values are related to a great extent to the position that takes care in the social structure and the transmission from generation to generation of the distinctions between social groups (social class, ethnic group, religion, gender, etc.). Attitudes and values are an important aspect in the formation of prejudices that not only can cause a

certain behavior (for example, discriminatory), but also «rationalize» to justify it.

Centering in the subject of the giftedness and the talent, we found, often, that parents as well as professionals center their reasonings in clearly stereotyped ideas or prejudices that shows ignorance as well as a social fear to accept differences. A particularity of the intellectual exceptional nature is that it causes opposed feelings: on one hand, of admiration and pride; but, on the other hand, of envies and fear. As we said, the necessity to categorize a behavior that excels of the norm can take in to hasty opinions devoid of solid premises (prejudices). One of the factors that influence remarkably in the formation of prejudices is partial or inadequate information that arrives mainly through mass media. These can get to mainly constitute an essential determinant of the attitudes of the family and the professional of the education since they reinforce the weak attitudes and prejudices, specially if they do not have other sources of information to resist and to conform a different attitude (Six, 1985). This prejudice becomes stereotype at the moment at which it is seen minimumly confirmed and it roots like an explanatory rigid guideline of the reality.

Let us see now some of the characteristics of the prejudices:

- They can be explained from specific processes of processing the cognitive information. For example, the generalization or excessive accentuation, when we considered the common characteristics of a concrete object like to all the objects of its category (Reasoning of the type: «A: Juan is gifted. B: Juan has emotional problems. C: All the gifted ones have emotional problems»).
- Prejudices can direct the cognitives processes of the individual, that is to say, the prejudices can modify the behavior of the prejudged subject and, in this form, being confirmed. (Pygmalion effect, Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968)
- Prejudices are acquired from indirect experiences, from the socializing influence of the social surroundings (family, mass media, etc.). (Processes of categorización in the social stereotypes, Doise, Deschamps and Mugny, 1985.) The categorización is a psychological process with which we explained the organization that the subject does of the physical and social world. The process of categorial differentiation is a psycho-sociologic process that explains how the behaviors, valuations and representations of the individuals are conditioned by their belonging to different groups and the relations that among them settle down.
- One of the processes of formation of prejudices is related to the necessity to organize and to understand the situations of the daily life. This process is explained from the scope of the attribution. Theories of the attribution part from three assumptions: a) we are motivated to look for information that allow us to make attributions on causes and effects (usually we ask about the causes of our actions and those of the others); b) the allocation of causes follows certain rules or principles; and c) the attribution of causes influences in our later actions. Kelley (1973) studied the rules that sublie the atributionals decisions. To observe that two things happen at the same time (covariation) would be one of the fundamental principles, but the events can generally have several causes or explanations and the

subjects apply causal schemes. These are groups of explanatory beliefs or ideas of what causes produce certain effects. The causal schemes reflect our ideas on the reality, imply a reference frame to interpret the reality, provide structure when the information is ambiguous or partial.

- Resistance to the changes. We must consider that the prejudices continuously are reinforced by the individuals of the group.
- Prejudices have as main functions:
  - a) Reinforcement of the identity of a group in front of groups of different characteristics.
  - b) Justification of the discriminations and aggressions towards the minorities.

### Prejudices and Mythological Thought

When analyzing how prejudices are formed, we have been introducing natural forms of thought, habitually grouped like daily reasoning in contrast with the logical reasoning. Indeed, it is in these forms of daily thought where it connects what we could call «mythological or magical thought». Anyone of these forms of thought serves to interpret the reality, to accede to some type of knowledge, and to reduce the anxiety that always generates uncertainty, what is unknown. One of the so many functions of myths is that they are a pre-rational, magic, non-conceptual way to watch the reality. Commonly, the individual is only conscious of the tangible and symbolic way whereupon its myth is represented and in this way communicates the values of a specific culture, serving as a identity sign of the social group. If somebody question his group myths, would probably destroy his social foundations, because, at heart, would come to relativize the definitive solution that its culture has given to the problem of the meaning of life.

The myths transform, change of content and, even, of meaning, but the necessity of a «revealed truth», that in addition provides social identity, it is maintained throughout the human history. We must not forget that not-knowing generates anxiety, malaise, and, therefore, the myth is a human creation to give a *simple and quick* explanation to the natural and human phenomena that do not acquire meaning by the simple observation and the descriptive analysis, that is to say, require a superior explanatory level that appeases the anxiety in front of the unknown.

«*Myth designates a true history, a history of inestimable value, because it is sacred, exemplary and significant*» (Eliade, 1999). Although, at the moment, the word «myth» means, at a popular level, fiction or illusion, it hasn't lost its function of normative transmission, although it has lost progressively its religious value. Greek authors drained progressively *Mhytos* of all religious or metaphysical value. Opposed to *Logos* and later on to history, it finished meaning «what cannot exist in reality». The jewish-christian tradition relegated to the dominion of the lie and the illusion everything that was not justified or declared valid by one of both testaments, introducing a certain historical sense to

the religion, since the history narrated in testaments has a clearly chronological order (it happened in a certain time and in a certain place).

But the demystification of the greek religion and the triumph, with Socrates and Platon, of the rigorous and systematic philosophy, did not abolish the mythical thought definitively. On the other hand, it becomes difficult to conceive the radical overcoming of the mythical thought while the prestige of «origins» remains intact and the forgetfulness of what happened is considered in *illo tempore* (or in a trascendental world) as the main obstacle for the knowledge or the salvation. The rational man (in fact, one minority of intellectuals) does not replace the religious man and, for *homo religiosus*, the real, authentic existence, begins at the moment at which it receives the communication of a fundamental history.

For the cultures in which the myth continues having a value of true history, the main function of the myth is to reveal the exemplary models of all the rites and significant human activities: the feeding or the marriage as much as the work, the education, the art or the wisdom. The transmission is traditional and initiatic. The transmission is done through initiation rites in which the knowledge goes accompanied of a magic-religious power. They not only comply with a normative function but, perhaps still more important, of *transmission of knowledge* on the environment that allows the survival. In large measure, in the western culture, the religion took charge of the functions that the myth exerted in the considered primitive societies. In the XX century, we also have attended to movements clearly identifiable with eschatological and millennialists myths, and not only religion movements. Cohn, in 1963, wrote the following thing with regard to the nationalsocialism and the marxism-lenilism:

*«By the pseudoscientific slang which both use, there is a vision of the things that remembers specially the lucubration to which the people of the Middle Age gave themselves. The final, decisive fight, of the chosen ones (lets say “aryans” or “proletarians”) against the followers of the demon (jewish or bourgeois); the joy of dominate the world, or the one to live in absolute equality, or the two simultaneously, granted thanks to a decree of the Providence, to the chosen ones, that they will find therefore a compensation to their sufferings; the fulfillment of the last aims of the history of a universe finally deprived of evil, those are some of the old chimeras that still caress us.»*

Lets notice that as well as the modern man is considered constituted by History, the man of archaic societies is declared as a result of certain number of mythical events. *«Here is where the most important differences between the man of the archaic societies and the modern man notices: the irreversibility of the events, that, for the last one, is a characteristic note of History, does not constitute an evidence for the first one.»* (Eliade, 1999.)

Myth and, what's more important, some functions of the myth, have survived of multiple forms, although perhaps the modern man does not accept it consciously, in a clearly technological and materialistic society.

The rest of popular mythologies that did not undergo the critics of classic Homeric mythologies, still subsist in the Greek and Mediterranean beliefs of our days, masked and christianized. The catholic church, specially in rural scopes, cristianized part of the rituals of the pagan religions. At the same time, it

incorporated new rites of initiation and commemoration of the myth of Jesus Christ (although he has always been considered as a real historical personage).

But myths not only survive through the religion and the cult; they also arrive through sagas, legends and stories. It is in these narrations, although clearly diferenciabes, where we can appreciate the value of the initiation rituals and where the archetypal models of the human behavior are transmitted clearly.

Our society has not forget to vindicate its origins and, to a certain extent, the historiography has occupied the place of the myths, whereas it narrates what happened in the beginnings, what is real, and constitutes our present identity.

Although through the myths we acceded to all the necessary knowledge for the survival (from the divine origin to daily tasks, like seedtime), in the contemporary world the knowledge of the reality of the human being and its surroundings has been fragmented. To say it in another way, the oracles has been multiplied and professionalized; the capacity to dialog directly with nature has been lost.

The myths, far from paralyzing the human initiative, when appearing as intangible models, urge the creation in fact, continuously open new perspectives to the spirit of inventiveness of mankind. But the cristianized myths, popularized, transmitted as fiction to entertain (renewed in comic or fiction heroes) lose part of their magical power of renovation and creation. The part we rescue from the myth crystallizes in normative values, beliefs out of context, folk wisdom, prejudices.

### Myths and Intellectual Exceptionality

Therefore, if we consider the necessity to know, to give explanation and to control everything that surrounds us as something inherent to the human being, we can understand, in the subject that we are approaching, that the historical evolution of the attributable to the exceptional intelligence and to the person that has this characteristic has been transformed only in appearance, but the symbolic content remains (to a great extent) not modified.

In the first place, is necessary to consider that intelligence, like quality, is not a neutral element in our culture. An ample range of insults talks about the lack of intelligence; therefore, it is a desirable quality. As Castelló aimed (2001), the term «intelligence» has remained blurred because socially is desirable that is not something perfectly delimited; if it was, it would have left outside the category many people. Also it is by this that the quality of intelligent is granted in numerous scopes; lately, for example, emotional intelligence has been vindicated. Indeed, a part of the content of the myth is coded; the knowledge is not necessarily something explicit that must be thought or be resisted with reality; only must be acted. In the same way, when a term stays blurred it can be added or take off parts of meaning, without for that reason altering the concept; it can be acted being applied *ad hoc* to convenience of the situation. The function is reassuring, appeases the idea that clarifying terms (socioemotionally filled) carry with it a cognitive imbalance, therefore, an intellectual effort with unknown results.

Secondly, in spite of the extension of the term to multiple qualities, our culture excessively values a type of intelligence that it correlates with the academic talent. That is to say, logical and mathematical reasoning, memory and verbal aptitude. We could find different origins for each one of these abilities, but without a doubt, the Greek philosophy is the departure point of valuation of the logical and mathematical reasoning. The memory has more remote antecedents, since only the memory assured the subsistence of the myth in the ungraphed cultures. Indeed, the chosen ones (chamans, oracles, etc.), as myth carriers, they were it by his mnemonic capacities and their capacity of linguistic expression. On the other hand, the qualities that compose the academic talent are easily assimilable by the society.

Thirdly, the western society has always established what were the valid criteria («legal») in order to accede to the knowledge. Any person who is able to accede by itself to the knowledge, jumping the pre-established norms, usually is punished by the system. We could multiply the examples, from the expulsion of Adam and Eva of the Paradise<sup>3</sup>, to the processes of the Inquisition against Galileo or Servet. At the moment, it continues being specially punished the critical thought (independent) and the creative thought. The curiosity and the capacity to explore, far from being a quality, it is consider at a popular level a dangerous tendency («curiosity killed the cat»).

In fourth place, to discover series of subjects who are difficult to classify it generates, on one hand, the fear that they do not enter into a «standard» classification and therefore they are not easily identifiable (controlable); and, on the other hand, the desire to have those blurred attributes, to which a superior power is granted to them generally. This power would allow a fast access to the knowledge, the truth emerges and is revealed, the gift of the vision (in the sense to create and to organize the chaos) and, in synthesis, the fantasy relative to the omniscience as a form of mental power.

Finally, as a derivation of the previous point (relation wish-fear), we observed that superior intelligence (gift) must have a negative counterpart as a characteristic (weak point), for example, in its physical or emotional structure (of fragile constitution or emotionally unbalanced), or like expectable behavior (will have problems in the classroom). The archetype of the hero incorporates a series of exceptional qualities but some defects makes him vulnerable. Also evidences appear like inevitable exit to the use of the gifts of the hero. That is to say, the granted qualities must be used for the «good of the humanity» and not for his own benefit.

## Conclusions

We consider that exists a series of elements that form our social attitude towards the phenomenon of the giftedness (that are far enough from the reality of the subject of high capacities) and that are hardly modifiable since they are strongly rooted in the collective systems of beliefs of each culture. They are part

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<sup>3</sup> ...See there that Adam has become like one of us, expert of the good and the bad, lets throw him out of here, or he will be able to extends his hand, and also takes from the fruit of the tree to conserve the life, and eat from it, and live for evermore. Génesis (3.22)

of the human being like those aspects tied to the magician, the not-rational, the not-conscious thing and, therefore, the nonaccessible simply from the reason.

As we have exposed, the beliefs about the exceptional cognitive nature can be reassuring and be admitted like authentic knowledge of the reality of the subject. The problem of this type of operation begins when the answers are unsatisfactory, the prophecy at some moment fails; then, we have two options: to renew it (through a substitute myth) or to look for another type of answers, another type of function, that we could call «knowledge in itself». The first option takes us evidently to the repetition, like certain evolution within such parameters socially admitted. The knowledge in itself tolerates a change of attitudes and deep values, a change of the system of beliefs, which would imply a certain degree of «revolution» of thought.

The myths have many forms to express. The necessity to quantify the nonquantifiable has attributed a quasi-magician value to the I.Q. In the same way which throughout history it has been attributed to the numbers magical properties, the scores obtained in an intelligence test acquire an absolute value. The problem is not only in the instrument of measurement, although from our point of view I.Q tests only measure a part of the cognitives abilities that compose intelligence, but the fact that they are not used to interpret the reality of the subject but to label it.

We believe that the analysis of the natural forms of human thought, the transmission of models and systems of beliefs in a traditional way, our past done of myths and history, the resistance to the innovation (between other factors), would explain the difficulty to change the conception on the exceptional subject.

This work is no more than an attempt to shape our restlessness on a natural phenomenon. It does not exist *a priori* an intention that our own «beleifs» show up solutions or concrete answers, but to extend the perspective of points of view, since it is a complex phenomenon and, therefore, susceptible of a multidisciplinary analysis.

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