

The relationship between giftedness and PTSD

An exploration by Letitia de Jong, medical student at Groningen University at the request of the Gifted Adult Foundation (IHBV), August 2015

Abstract by Manon Savelkoul and Noks Nauta
Translation into English: Michael Gerasimoff

Introduction

Among the gifted and those who work with gifted persons, suspicion has arisen that a link may exist between giftedness and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The Gifted Adult Foundation (IHBV) requested the assistance of the Science Shop for Medicine and Public Health at Groningen University to explore this suspicion further. The University assigned Letitia De Jong, a medical student, to conduct a brief, general survey of the literature and to conduct eight interviews. She was allotted 84 hours for this task. Her report of the interviews is summarized below.

Literature

The time allotted for this project was too short for a systematic exploration. As a result, only the general literature on PTSD was examined; some articles submitted by Lisa Erickson (a psychotherapist working in Seattle), and a presentation by Lisa Erickson (2014; reference list on request). The literature survey provided input for the questions for the interviews.

Method

After a call to participate in a survey was circulated in the newsletter of the IHBV, nine persons volunteered for this project. Eight telephone interviews were subsequently conducted with gifted people who declared themselves as suffering the lasting effects of trauma (PTSD).

Results

Research Participants

All of the participants were women. Half of them have been officially tested for giftedness. Giftedness was presumed to exist in the other cases. One person was of high school age; four people were in the age range 30 and 40 years, and the remainder were older. The oldest participant was 58 years old.

Experiences with the giftedness

Most interviewees indicated that they often felt misunderstood from a young age. The participants were acknowledged typical problems with acknowledging (social) structures and hierarchy, as well as some disadvantages of giftedness such as perfectionism and high sensitivity. A common theme expressed by participants was that one told only a limited number of people that one is gifted; that is, giftedness is not always socially acceptable. The diagnosis of giftedness often provided an explanation for many questions.

Diagnosis

In three of the eight study participants, giftedness only came to light when one went into treatment for PTSD. In the other five, they already knew that they were gifted before treatment for PTSD, or it came to be understood simultaneously. We note that *how* the PTSD diagnosis was arrived at, and *by whom*, was not a criterion in this interview process.

What role is played by giftedness in PTSD?

When the participants were questioned regarding the role they thought giftedness played in their PTSD, there were a range of replies. Some thought of giftedness as a factor ensuring that their experience of the trauma was persistent. In that case, giftedness facilitated the traumatic-disorder process. Susceptibility to trauma would also seem to be exacerbated by the high sensitivity commonly demonstrated by the gifted. Furthermore, many participants indicated that, as school children, they felt misunderstood and that they were even abused because of their giftedness from a very young age.

Professional support and treatment

Many participants felt that having a therapist who was themselves gifted, or had an understanding of giftedness, was a distinct advantage in their treatment. Some interviewees reported this explicitly. A number of people also indicated that they had difficulty with treatment because they were exceptionally rational, while it is particularly important in the treatment of PTSD to get into contact with your emotions. Participants frequently reported a

perception that cognitive behavioral therapy in combination with EMDR was the best treatment.

Conclusion of the authors of this summary

As a result of these eight interviews, we see the necessity for further research in this area. The time allotted was too short for a proper study of what is obviously a complex topic.

New questions

We believe that the results from these interviews are still too general. How exactly do giftedness and PTSD come together? What traumatic experiences leading to PTSD are related specifically to giftedness? This should be explored through in-depth interviews by persons with backgrounds in psychology and/or psychotherapy.

Regarding the assertion that the therapist *should* be gifted to effectively treat a gifted client, this remains unknown. An investigation into the therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the gifted client is in preparation.

The authors

Manon Savelkoul, PhD, Health Scientist, works from the IHBV to investigate the therapeutic relationship between the gifted and their counselor.

Noks Nauta is a medical doctor and psychologist and board member of the IHBV.

Contact: Noksnauta@ihbv.nl