



# Gifted and Talented International

Volume 24, Number 2, December, 2009.

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# The Importance of Decision Making: A Gifted Case Report

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## Abstract

In this article the story of a fictional young university-educated woman is presented who struggles with making choices in her career and in her life. In this case report background information on gifted people at work is provided. In addition to that jobs and companies which are appropriate for highly gifted are mentioned. Besides that possibilities are considered in how to deal with interpersonal problems, how to apply for a job, and how to talk about the conditions conducive to optimal performance. Psychological processes like irrational thoughts, the process of making choices and dealing with how emotions work out in the highly gifted are discussed. Learning to make choices can help gifted people experience the joy of living and of working!

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**Keywords:** Gifted adults, adults making choices, career counseling, university-educated.

## There are choices

Decision-making processes can be onerous for gifted people. Life transitions often force a person to make difficult choices, and the gifted frequently face challenges in making career and lifestyle choices. How does that happen? And how can we counsel gifted people in making such important choices? This article profiles Kitty, a young and gifted woman. Her decision-making processes as she makes the transition from her life as a student/adolescent to a working adult. At the outset: although Kitty is a fictional character, her character and story is an amalgam of authentic individuals and real cases.

## Kitty's case: Youth and school

When “Kitty den Hollander” graduated from university with a major in mathematics at the age of 22, she faced a number of important choices in her life. The youngest of three children, Kitty showed evidence of her giftedness at an early age. Her sister Sandra, five years older and her brother Bob, one year older, were also smart. But Kitty was always different. When her brother Bob learned to read, Kitty immediately joined him and they soon became real pals in everything, leaving her sister Sandra sometimes feeling shut out. With a five-year age difference, this seldom led to serious problems, but it did cause a strain in their relationship that is still evident even today.

Kitty did well in school until seventh grade when she began to experience academic and social problems. She withdrew into herself and for a long time didn't like going to school. Her teacher recognized in Kitty the characteristics of a highly intelligent person and sought confirmation through the school advisory service. Kitty was tested and it turned out she was indeed highly intelligent.

The school psychologist offered Kitty's teachers and parents practical tips to support her development. For example, Kitty was given the opportunity to read at her level in a higher grade. She also received extra assignments in the school library where she helped to modernize the system used to loan books.

Kitty responded well to these arrangements and went to school with pleasure again. She made more friends and started music lessons, quickly showing a real talent for the violin. Kitty was able to release her energy while playing the instrument. She soon joined a youth orchestra and later became an orchestra leader.

### **Characteristics of high intelligence**

Recognizing high IQ alone is insufficient to define gifted people, a group of experts (people who are themselves gifted *and* work with the gifted) in the Netherlands conducted a research project in 2006/2007 to determine what the term “gifted” means (Kooijman, 2008). The Delphi method was used for this research. This research generated a theoretical model that resulted in the following definition based on commonly shared characteristics:

A gifted individual is a quick and clever thinker, who is able to deal with complex matters. Autonomous, curious and passionate. A sensitive and emotionally rich person, living intensely. He or she enjoys being creative. (Kooijman, 2008)

The above-mentioned Delphi research paid much attention to the characteristics of gifted. The following characteristics are the most eye-catching from the list:

- Highly intelligent (thinking);
- Autonomous (being);
- Many-faceted emotional life (feeling);
- Passionate and curious (wanting);
- Highly sensitive (perceiving);
- Creation-directed (doing); and
- Sparkling original, quick, intense and complex (interplay).

### **Kitty's case**

#### **Choice of major**

At home, although Kitty’s parents allowed her freedom to pursue her interests, they were somewhat controlling. She did well in sciences in high school and so her parents pushed her to study mathematics, even going so far as identifying their preference of both the university and sorority they felt would best fit Kitty. Kitty, however, was far more interested in attending a school of music, but wanting to please her parents, she gave in to their request. She began to study theoretical mathematics commuting between her hometown and the nearby university so that she could live at home.

During her studies Kitty felt increasingly uncertain and sometimes even slightly depressed. She started fighting with her mother. She wanted to go to parties at night in her university town, but her parents thought that would be dangerous. As a result she had little contact with her fellow students.

Kitty finished her degree within the expected time and continued playing in the orchestra, greatly enjoying it. She found a series of summer jobs. But problems emerged during her jobs because she often spoke up and interfered in things she thought didn’t go well. Neither her colleagues nor the management appreciated her advice, and often conflicts resulted.

#### **Interpersonal problems in the work environment**

Gifted people are often unaware of the effects of their quick and sharp analyses and their capacity to see through complex situations. They can appear as “know-it-alls” in their work environment creating interpersonal problems between themselves, their supervisors and colleagues who feel threatened by unexpected critical insights. Researchers Nauta and Corten (2002) described how such a mismatch can arise based on different interpretations of the interactions between the gifted and the work environment. They also found that by exposing these differences greater understanding was created between both parties.

#### **Choosing a job**

After graduation, Kitty started looking for a fulltime job. She saw an advertisement for a job as a graduate assistant to work on a dissertation that complemented her own thesis - a very

theoretical subject in numerical mathematics. Predictably her parents were very enthusiastic, but while they thought it a good way to start her career, Kitty was not really happy. She suffered nightmares, waking up in a sweat, and a sense of suffocation.

Kitty began to ask herself whether this job was what *she* wanted -- or was it her parents' choice? She discussed her dilemma with a girlfriend, a student of psychology who understood that this was truly an important moment in her life and that Kitty was struggling to make the right choice.

Kitty's friend advised postponement of the decision for a while and to ask for help. She had recently heard about a special workshop that helped smart people make good life choices and work on their careers. She thought that this was what Kitty needed.

### ***The career adventure***

Kitty started looking for jobs on the Internet, but found nothing of interest. She did, however, find a notice about career counseling for gifted people. It was labeled as *a career adventure* and was aimed at very intelligent people who had not learned how to make choices based on their own interests. It was an adventure that appealed to her.

She learned the program involved spending a day in nature, the completion of several assignments, and a follow-up meeting three weeks later. She hesitated, thinking it sounded vague and that she was too young for that approach. However, Kitty, knowing she had to do something, finally decided to register. Her parents were not willing to pay for it, but Kitty was undaunted and she decided it would be worth it.

After the event, she did not think she got everything possible out of it. At her request, she met with one of the counselors of the program. Kitty expressed herself as follows:

"I was sent into the woods with a number of other people with a rather vague assignment. I looked around and did not really know what I had to do. I asked Harry what he thought; he wasn't too sure either. I really didn't see the use of it at that point, but I thought that wouldn't be nice for my counselors and the others. So I decided to do the assignment as well as I could. I was afraid that otherwise I would create all kinds of confusion and that the others would find me a boring whiner. It was only after the whole thing was over that I questioned what I had done, out there in the woods.

I had only been working on things that others expected of me and I wanted to be liked. But I didn't do what I really wanted to do. I was really shocked by that. That's what I always had done up to that point: not doing what I wanted... Even in choosing my field of study.... So I did not get everything available out of it. I thought, '*Can I have a do-over?*'"

### ***Interfering thoughts***

This story highlights a number of irrational thoughts that got in the way of Kitty making her own choices. Irrational thoughts contain an exaggerated "must" and impose unreasonable demands on yourself or others. For Kitty, they were the following thoughts:

- *Everybody must like me, value me, think the best of me and love me.*
- *I must always be concerned about others.*

Kitty is an example of someone who unerringly feels how she can serve many others, especially her parents, but she then ignores her own wishes and dreams (desire to please). Neihart (1999) noted that gifted adolescents often possess the traits of perfectionism and competitiveness (in Kitty's case, these traits were less recognizable); have a strong drive to please their parents; and experience high expectations from parents.

Miller (1979) also wrote about gifted children who are especially sensitive to the expectations of others, and who by following their parents' wishes negate their own feelings. Even though there are no precise studies in this regard, in our opinion based on our experience, highly gifted learn from an early age to show consideration for others, sometimes to an exaggerated degree.

Two weeks later Kitty had a conversation with the counselor to evaluate the day and she explained to the counselor her feelings and what went through her mind.

“I could feel myself becoming increasingly insecure with assignments that weren’t clear to me. This resulted in me being confronted with myself. I really wanted to cry, but I didn’t dare give in to that desire. I thought the stories told by other people were interesting, and I listened to them a lot. I did not dare say too much myself, but I did like to be outdoors for a full day, even though it was cold. I had never really done anything like that.

When I came home, I did not really feel better. Because I still was not sure about anything, I took the job as a graduate assistant anyway. I was shown how to do the job by an unmarried woman who had been working there for thirty years! Only then did I realize I had made the wrong decision! I imagined me still being there thirty years from now... I would die of misery. I panicked, but pushed that feeling aside quickly. What could I do with that feeling? And besides, could I really have refused such an important research position?”

This story clearly shows that Kitty found it very hard to deal with her emotions. She was afraid to say what she thought and felt because she was afraid others would then find her a boring nag. She also dared not cry and so hid her sadness and feeling of being hemmed in.

### ***Dealing with emotions***

In general, the basic emotions fall into four categories: angry, happy, scared and sad. Gifted people present many nuances in this range of feelings, but, dependent upon the situation in which they find themselves or where their thoughts lead them, they sometimes lose touch with their own feelings and emotions. It is possible they start thinking obsessively about what others think of them or what kinds of disasters could happen (Ellis & Harper, 1975). Their feelings may then become negative, causing loss of inspiration, willpower and passion. In conversations Kitty reconnected with her feelings.

### **A plan for the future**

Confused, Kitty sought help from the career coach she had met previously during the career adventure. The career coach proposed that Kitty participate in a forestry project in Scotland. It was suggested that in such a completely different environment, where she would perform physical work, she might be able to figure out what was bothering her and what led her to choose a job she didn’t really like.

After this conversation and on her way home, Kitty ran into her cousin Caroline on the train. Caroline had always led a rather wild life and they had lost touch over the years, but when they met they caught up and reminisced about things remembered from the past. At one point Caroline recounted: “When I used to visit you at home, your mother said that she thought I was a bit too free and also impertinent. That “her Kitty” was not like that at all. Later, I was talking about something, that you apparently weren’t allowed to hear and then she asked me to shut my mouth. I said: “Shut your own mouth.” Your mother really blew up at that! I have always remembered that. I believe that afterwards I was no longer welcome at your house.”

This story shocked Kitty, but she remembered that her mother always had an excuse why Caroline was no longer allowed to visit. Although Kitty accepted that Caroline was impertinent, she also knew she was always good for a laugh. After some reflection Kitty realized that her mother had really ruled her life and she acknowledged her passive obedience.

Caroline listened sympathetically as Kitty described how she did not really like her job and how she wanted to do something else. Kitty admitted that she did not know what it was she really wanted but she had received an offer from a career coach to go to Scotland to take time to reflect and find out what she really liked.

Caroline thought this a fantastic idea and wanted to go with her! After some deliberations, they decided to go together. Kitty was not sure if this was really a good idea as Caroline was rather

dominant. Would she just do what Caroline wanted? She thought it was all rather scary and worried about how to tell her boss at work.

Eventually she decided to go with Caroline and was relieved when there were no objections at work. When she called her mother to tell her that she was going to Scotland with Caroline, her mother said: "With Caroline? Well, if you think this is good for you, go ahead and do it. But I worry a bit..." In the background she heard her father say: "Good, she can bring me a bottle of Scotch..."

### ***Adventures in Scotland***

After arriving in Findhorn, Scotland, it took Kitty a few days before she began to enjoy herself. She felt very closely connected to the group and did all kinds of things she never thought she would enjoy. Luckily, Caroline was in another group and returned home after a week. But Kitty added another week. With six other participants, she planted trees in the Scottish Highlands together with a Scottish couple she met, John and Linda. Kitty found their ideas a little vague, but she was fascinated by the rough outdoors life. She said that for the first time in her life she felt really alive. She could feel her muscles, and her arms were covered with scratches and mosquito bites, which made her feel very proud. She also had a 'real' boyfriend. It was all very exciting!

Her parents worried about what Kitty was doing, but she just "forgot" to call them. She sent an occasional text message that she was all right. Kitty's musical talents were greatly appreciated. In the evening there often was singing around the campfire and people were impressed with her voice. She had not brought her violin, as it was too fragile. Besides, her fingers were stiff from the rough work, so it would not have worked anyway.

She decided to stay for another month and resigned from her job as a graduate assistant. Her parents were very disappointed thinking it a foolish decision. Her mother had no need to worry. It was not something Kitty shared with her mother but despite really enjoying the interesting contacts and her rough wildlife experience, she realized that planting trees and becoming a forest ranger was not her final career destination.

Longing to see her girlfriends, she went home for a weekend. Her parents, although still very critical of her choice, noticed her radiance. "We have not seen you like this for a long time!" Kitty decided to sign on for one more month in Scotland.

Upon her return to the Netherlands she had no idea what she would do next, but she was fully confident that she would find something that would suit her. She now knew what real living was. And she had become much more assertive. She had also experienced how it felt to make your own choices. She would not have missed this adventure for the world!

### ***Back to work?***

While working in Scotland it became clear in Kitty's mind that she was not in the least motivated to work as a graduate assistant. She realized that she had taken this job mainly to please her parents. Her brother Bob, with whom she still had a very good relationship, against his parents' wishes had wanted to become a writer and had already published a couple of short stories. Kitty now knew what she did *not* want, but she didn't really know what she *did* want. She noticed that she still had a tendency to accommodate people and acquiesce to the wishes of others. She was aware that this did not make her happy. She knew that she had to stay away from her parents and find her own way.

### ***Choice for action!***

Strengthened by her experience in Scotland Kitty decided to do the following:

#### **1. Adjust the contact with her parents**

Up to that time, Kitty too often did what she thought her parents wanted. Although she really liked her parents, this now bothered her. She wanted to make her own choices and decided to inform her parents of this fact. She trained for that talk with a girlfriend who gave her tips. Additionally, she decided to start looking for her own apartment as soon as possible and move out.

## 2. Work on a career choice

She resigned her graduate assistant job and her supervisor told her she thought that was a shame. But Kitty did not consider going back or choosing another similar job. For a while she just wanted to make money somewhere as a waitress while thinking about her next steps. She was still young, so she had plenty of time to look. Besides, she could always switch jobs!

Kitty really enjoyed her singing experience in Scotland. She signed up for singing lessons and a theater orientation course which trained students to become drama therapists - an option that appealed to her. She also thought about studying music. She loved folk music and also considered learning to play the guitar, so she could accompany herself. Or maybe she could work on something to do with the environment.

## 3. Work on her private life

The boyfriend in Scotland was long gone. She was sad about that, but she realized that it was not realistic to keep in touch. She started going out a little more frequently in hopes to meet nice guys. It had become much easier for her to make personal contacts.

### ***How to make real choices***

Over the following few months, Kitty became aware a number of physiological signals for the first time in her life. She did not yet know exactly their significance, but she experienced:

- Tensions in her body: cold sweats, trembling, headaches
- Feelings of fear, uncertainty and also sometimes gloom
- Feelings of pleasure, enjoying the outdoors, doing what she liked in Scotland, and especially, not thinking about her parents
- Anxiety, feelings that she *had to* make choices. In Scotland she noticed that by doing things without consciously choosing, she intuitively sensed whether it was good or not. That was quite a relief.

These signals increased her awareness that:

- She certainly had taken another step towards becoming independent;
- She had *permission* to choose for herself – even though she wasn't sure how to apply that knowledge;
- She had certain patterns of behavior, i.e., doing what others expected of her, fearing independent action and feeling, and wanting to be liked. She did not dare cry, become angry, or say what she wanted;
- Her cousin Caroline went to the other extreme, but still she learned a lot from her; and
- There were times when she had found her own way in the woods in Scotland and that had made her more aware of what she liked.

Through her adventures, Kitty learned to accept her own feelings. Together with her insight into her actions and choices, she realized that this was the basis for making her own choices instead of doing what other people wanted.

### ***Selection process***

Making choices can be seen as a multi-step process where the emphasis is on rational comparisons. This can be expressed through an eight-step process:

- Step 1:** Exploring your situation;
- Step 2:** Exploring your goals and desires;
- Step 3:** Exploring your capacities;
- Step 4:** Exploring your interests;
- Step 5:** Exploring study/ work opportunities ... and alternatives;

- Step 6:** Exploring alternatives;
- Step 7:** Making choices; and
- Step 8:** Executing.

Often gifted people make their choices as part of a search process, where they experience that they might run into barriers while just making logical choices. That is different from what they are used to. Exploring their own interests, motivations and feelings contribute more to making their choices.

### ***Learning to choose***

Kitty wanted help with this, she was confused. She started seeing a psychologist who counsels the gifted and coaches them in their selection process. A series of ten appointments was proposed. Kitty thought that would be too much and, using the lessons she had learned about herself, quietly proposed another plan. "How about we start with five conversations, and then after those five meetings we can see how far I have come and then determine how much I still need." In the past she would not have dared say anything. But to Kitty's amazement, her coach thought this was a good idea!

### ***Value profile***

Gifted individuals tend to have a strongly developed moral sense (Jacobsen, 1999). The coach encouraged Kitty to develop a profile of what she considered her values – her value profile. Together with her coach she went back over the times she had made important choices in her life - what she did, thought and felt. This revealed Kitty's special enjoyment in making music, an ability to help a person who was down, and good listening skills. With the coach's help Kitty made a chart showing her strong qualities and her weaknesses.

The profile showed, in order of significance, the values Kitty considered very important in her life:

1. Justice: Kitty thought that people should deal with each other in ways that are just. For example, she thought that there is too much poverty in the world and that money is not distributed equally.
2. Honesty: For Kitty honesty first of all meant: not lying. But it also specifically meant: being able to voice criticism openly. She thought it very dishonest if people talk about each other behind their backs. "Just tell me your criticism straight out!"
3. Reliability: For Kitty to be reliable was being able to depend on her promise to do something. She thought that everybody should do the same. "Say that you have no time rather than promising something and not doing it!!"
4. Independence.

Independence turned out to be very important: she wanted to be able to live *her* way. She wanted to be able to arrange her time independently and definitely did not want anybody checking on her. She now realized that she also wanted to be able to use her analytical gifts. But she had always noticed that this was not very well appreciated when she gave her analyses of what was wrong.

Other important values emerged from the value profile, e.g., humour, creativity, integrity and respect. Other people's values, e.g., material riches, profit and beauty, she definitely rejected.

During the conversations with her coach Kitty questioned where her values could best be supported, what kind of companies she could work for and what kind of jobs she would feel comfortable doing. In an earlier conversations Kitty's qualities were also discussed. They combined both values and qualities to answer the questions.

### ***Choice of professions by gifted people***

Although gifted people are naturally vastly different, based on experience of gifted individual's in the work force, some generalities can be offered (Corten, Nauta & Ronner, 2006). We



also refer here to some previous work, i.e., 'Bored, Bored, Bored: The Quest for challenging work (See: Streznevski, 1999, p 130). These work characteristics favour gifted persons and also closely match the 'task culture' and 'personality culture' (Harrison, 1972). Circumstances under which gifted generally function well share the following characteristics:

- Challenge and stimulation;
- Flexibility;
- Minimal hierarchy;
- Few fixed procedures (only when they are useful);
- Importance of development and employees' needs;
- Room for productive conflicts and debate; and
- Power and influence obtained by expertise, dedication and success (or at the most by personality, expertise and exceptional performances).

### ***Tips when applying for a job***

Finally, Kitty's behaviours during and after the job application process were examined. Together Kitty and the coach examined how best she could state her values, wishes and expectations that were important to her in her work. In this context, it was thought appropriate that she should impose a number of 'conditions' on her own behaviour so that she could function well. It was also considered important that she should ask questions about company culture and the elements that might have an impact on her values. Questions included:

- I work best when I get room to work independently. Is that possible here?
- I noticed that I am good at solving problems I see in work processes. Would you like it if I suggested solutions?
- I think it important that when I promise to do something I also do it. Is the work culture here like that?
- I prefer colleagues to talk openly among themselves about things that are not going well. Is that usual here, too?

After these conversations she decided to let everything 'sink in' for a little while.

### ***Three months later***

While pondering her career options, Kitty worked as a waitress in a restaurant, a good place to use her urge to please people! She was surprised by people's conversations in the restaurant. She wondered what this was that all about. She was equally surprised by her colleagues. They had lots of fun together, talked about their looks and the customers', about going out and partying. Kitty thought it was all rather superficial. Sometimes she managed to join them, but living this way did not really interest her.

She learned how to deal with rude customers. After a few unpleasant experiences she showed by her attitude and her words that there were limits and that customers should behave respectfully. She was very proud of that. She also learned how she could expand this 'limiting conduct' to her parents without offending them.

These experiences consistently proved to Kitty that she wanted a job where she could work independently, which would allow for deep conversations to be held, where open and honest communication was important and where she could help or counsel people. She also knew that she really enjoyed music. She took up her violin again. She joined a pleasant and good orchestra, but also knew that she did not want to do this for a living. She seriously thought about studying medicine. But at the same time she dreaded going back to school for a long time and she was afraid of the atmosphere in a hospital. She wondered whether hospital work would provide honesty and reliability.

Maybe she should just do something, just like she did in Scotland, to see how it felt. After all, in Scotland she had learned that she could trust her own feelings. With these thoughts in mind she decided to look for that 'real' job.

### **A year later**

Kitty again contacted the coach who had first drawn her attention to the project in Scotland. During her 'temporary' job period, she had tutored one of her nephews in math and she discovered that she really liked mathematics. However, she did not want to teach. The coach now pointed out to her a number of small banks who invested in third-world projects. Following this advice she applied for a job at a small bank where she was immediately hired.

Kitty now had a much better idea of what she wanted. After six months both Kitty and her boss are very happy. Her colleagues had started using her mathematical talent and her calm reliability worked extremely well with external customers. Impressed by her performance, her boss created a new position for her. Kitty was given a responsible position where she reports directly to the bank's Board and where she can work very independently. She gives advice about work processes, supports colleagues when they are dealing with complicated computations of pensions and insurance and is a reliable colleague and counselor.

Recently Kitty also started a relationship with a colleague from another office. She is very happy with her life!

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### **Conclusion**

Making choices is a difficult process for many individuals who show the potential for gifted behaviour. People lacking such potential may be limited in their choices because they do not have the same capacity. Gifted individuals suffer from multi-potentiality. When making choices, this can be an important obstacle. In addition, perfectionism and their large cognitive-analytical capacity play a significant role. Characteristics of gifted people which hamper decision making include:

- They are capable of so many things, there is no limit to what they can do;
- They have many interests, there is no limit to what they want;
- They have a high energy level;
- They can quickly grasp complex situations (seeing all the options and the accompanying advantages and disadvantages at the same time), but there are limits when they have to make choices: all advantages and disadvantages come in at the same time and they cannot feel the differences in the level of importance. This creates confusion;
- Perfectionism which hinders them in making choices: only one 'single, correct decision' can be made (sometimes an irrational thought);
- They concentrate on reason (where they excel), the gifted sometimes do not trust their own feelings enough when making choices; and
- Gifted people often only experience their feelings when they are in a new situation and not before. Only then do they experience how something feels and they can find meaning (using their intellect) on the basis of which they can make a choice.

By way of Kitty's case we have endeavoured to illustrate how gifted people can learn how to make better choices if and when they are aware of these characteristics and their problems and learn how to deal with them. Parents and teachers and, if necessary, professional coaches, can provide support. Learning to make appropriate and satisfying choices can give gifted people the joy of living and the joy of working!

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