





Mental Super-Efficiency (“Zebra” Individuals): An Emerging Little-Known Condition

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Dear Editor,

We would like to highlight the characteristics of individuals (also known as “zebras”) presenting with “mental super-efficiency”, “high potential”, or an “atypical profile”. They are generally described as having natural abilities or skills that are significantly superior to those of the average of the population in various domains (intellectual, creative, artistic, sports). It is estimated that only 5% of the population exhibit this atypical profile (1). These individuals constitute a little-known branch of giftedness. Nowadays, mental super-efficiency is still poorly understood and, yet, there is no term that accurately describes this condition.

Many authors have worked on the characterization of gifted individuals, as it is a complex and very interesting subject. In 1978, JS Renzulli presented a new definition of giftedness that focuses on three clusters of traits: above average general ability, high level of task commitment, and high level of creativity (2). In 1987, H Gardner proposed a new view of intelligence with the Theory of Multiple Intelligencies, and expanded the concept of intelligence to also include such areas as music, special relations, interpersonal knowledge in addition to mathematical and linguistic ability. According to H Gardner, human beings have nine different kinds of intelligence that reflect different ways of interacting with the world, and each person as a unique combination (3).

Mental super-efficiency individuals have a highly atypical psychological profile, including a naturally sophisticated mental organization associated with a hypersensitive sensory and emotional system, resulting in an acute perception of reality. They function in a state of heightened sensitivity, vigilance and hyperlucidity. They can present with hyperesthesia, an acute sensorial sharpness affecting one or more of the five human senses.

The arborescent or tree-like thought structure allows them to quickly and unconsciously explore many lines of thought simultaneously and in parallel.

Mentally super-efficient individuals often feel different and misunderstood as early as childhood (4). In 1983, AJ Tannenbaum was interested in the social cognition of gifted adolescent and explored the stigma of giftedness paradigm. He highlighted the fact that a climate of social acceptance must be created in the community so that the gifted will want to realize their potential rather than suppress their exceptionalities (5). Later, adaptation to modern society requires a constant and exhausting effort for them, which is why they develop coping strategies to compensate for their difference and blend into the mass, hence their nickname “zebra” (1). In parallel, super-efficient individuals develop a value system based on absolutes. Their idealistic mode of thinking is scarcely compatible with the implicit social niceties governing relations between norm-thinkers and they are easy prey for manipulators. The main characteristic of “zebras” is their much higher-than-average intelligence. Their paradox could be summarized as follows: “The more intelligent we are, the more we doubt it and the less we know it”.

The intellectual and emotional abilities of these mentally super-efficient individuals remain exceptional, and should be detected early and highlighted in our society.

We trust that this paper will improve understanding among the scientific community.

Keywords: Atypical profile, high intellectual potential, gifted, zebra, mental super-efficiency

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