



Giftedness From the Cradle to Senescence

A Review of

The Development of Giftedness and Talent Across the Life Span

by Frances Degen Horowitz, Rena F. Subotnik, and Dona J. Matthews (Eds.)

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The Development of Giftedness and Talent Across the Life Span, edited by Frances Degen Horowitz, Rena F. Subotnik, and Dona J. Matthews, is a highly readable, groundbreaking compilation of what psychology knows about the topic of giftedness. The book, which follows the development of talent from infancy to old age, describes ways of cultivating it at all levels as well as obstacles to its fulfillment. It is destined to become a classic in the field. The authors explore the interplay of internal and external forces, especially ability, age, ethnicity, and social and educational settings, in fostering talent. They stress that the field is moving away from using the term *giftedness* to speaking of identifying and developing *talent*, and they advise broadening the concept of talent to include areas beyond the academic. The book investigates old as well as new points of view, giving suggestions for further research and offering advice on nurturing gifted people at all stages of life. As in most edited volumes, chapters vary in quality of content and literary style. The material of greatest interest to me is discussed below.

In the foreword, Carol S. Dweck informs us that, in contrast with previous works such as the predecessor (Horowitz & O'Brien, 1985) of the current volume that categorized people simply as *gifted* or *not gifted*, this volume "recognizes that talent is often very specific, that it can wax and wane over time, and that one of the most exciting questions facing researchers today is how to encourage and sustain talent—across cultures and across the life span" (p. xi).

Throughout the volume, the authors define talent less as a pure gift than as an achievement that continues to evolve, speaking of the fascination for the subject and long hours of work that typically go into developing high levels of skill. The old views stressed the inborn nature of talent and neglected the input of social factors. In contrast, Horowitz mentions later in her chapter that Feldman noted in 1986 that without the provision of a violin, even the potentially most gifted violinist will not become a violinist (p. 5).

Dweck writes that when talent falls by the wayside, it is generally not because the gift is lost but because the passion for developing it has disappeared. She states that motivation, as much as innate ability, is strong in people with highly developed skills. Horowitz uses the wonderful phrase "rage to master" (p. 15) to describe the intensity and sustained interest that lead to an advanced development of expertise. Such a drive may be lacking in minority groups, yet recent research has shown that motivation-relevant intervention can significantly boost grades and achievement scores of minority students. For confirmation, one only has to look at the brilliant record of Michelle Obama, our First Lady, whose education at a magnet high school in Chicago prepared her for a highly successful education at Princeton University and Harvard Law School (Bond, in press).

In her chapter "Introduction: A Developmental Understanding of Giftedness and Talent," Horowitz questions whether accurate predictions can be made about the development of giftedness. She writes that child prodigies may not grow up to become exceptional adults, and extraordinary adults may not have been outstanding children. Talent is not a stable

characteristic but may wax and wane throughout the life span, affected by such variables as socioeconomic status, years of parental education, a teacher's special interest in the child, family stability, and living in advantaged neighborhoods (p. 13).

In addition, she says, evidence indicates that no accurate prediction can be made as to who will be talented or gifted across the life span; furthermore, there is no evidence that once a person is identified as gifted, he or she will remain in that category. And there is always the possibility that an individual not identified as gifted early in life would be classified in the gifted category later on. We do not know why this is true, and further research is called for to investigate the factors that contribute to a person's being "at promise" as well as "at need." This brings to mind Freud's remark that although we understand ability, nobody understands genius.

Horowitz also postulates that there are moments in development when relationships among relevant variables change and new ones are introduced that possibly enhance or diminish giftedness. It is at these nodal points, she concludes, that discontinuity is at its highest level and intervention is most helpful. Such points differ among individuals, and there is no reason to expect continuity in development. It is interesting that most of the contributors to the book agree on this issue.

In the chapter "Issues in Early Prediction and Identification of Intellectual Giftedness," Gottfried, Gottfried, and Guerin agree with Subotnik and Olszewski-Kubilus (1997, as cited on p. 52) that when it comes to prediction, parents do better than test scores alone in identifying talent. Talented children are more likely to ask for lessons and activities, their parents are more responsive than those of less endowed children, and their home environments are intellectually and artistically more stimulating. The authors conclude that if high potential is to be recognized early, it should be used not merely to identify children as gifted but to enable their talents to be nurtured appropriately.

Ellen Winner, in "Toward Broadening Our Understanding of Giftedness: The Spatial Domain," speaks of the attempts of psychologists to explain adult giftedness by looking into the individual's childhood and early environment. Although the study of giftedness has never been part of mainstream psychology, much can be learned by taking a developmental approach. There is some evidence that uneven profiles are characteristic of individuals gifted in art or music. For example, Simonton (1999, as cited on p. 77) noted that Beethoven had poor mathematical and verbal ability. Savants are evidence that gifted people have uneven ability and especially that general intelligence is unrelated to high levels of achievement in some domains.

According to clinical observations, high-IQ children demonstrate methods of thinking that are qualitatively different from those of the typical child, displaying an intense drive and working for hours without parental prodding or reinforcement. One study (p. 79) found that the highest achieving scientists differ from those of lesser accomplishment not in intellectual ability but in the capacity for concentration and hard work. Michelle Obama in her early years is a good example of a child possessing this "rage to master." She worked for hours at her studies and kept practicing the piano until her parents forced her to stop. It is unknown how many children are highly gifted but unmotivated and therefore are overlooked.

The importance of early environment has been demonstrated in a retrospective study of giftedness (Bloom, 1985, as cited on p. 79): Adults who achieved world-class status in the arts, science, math, and athletics received strong family support and years of childhood training; they also reported high ability at a very young age, consistent with parental accounts of the brilliance of child prodigies (one cannot overlook the possibility, however, that children of high ability in a given area are likely to have a strong drive to master that area).

Quantitative studies (e.g., Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993, as cited on p. 80) have confirmed the necessity of practice in the development of outstanding talent, indicating that high achievement in music, bridge, chess, and athletics can be predicted by the number of hours of deliberate practice engaged in and that the best musicians spend over twice as many hours in practice over a lifetime as do the less successful ones. Nevertheless, whatever accounts for giftedness in terms of nurture, an innate component cannot be ruled out. Winner concludes, "It seems that environmental stimulation, personality, and temperament variables can promote or strangle giftedness but cannot create giftedness out of normality" (p. 80).

In Chapter 7 ("Giftedness in Adolescence: African American Gifted Youth and Their Challenges From a Motivational Perspective") Sandra Graham mentions that the National Research Council (2002, as cited on p. 110) has reported that African American students are about half as likely as White students to be in gifted programs. Graham believes there are barriers to the perceptions of "I can" that African American students encounter in the development of their gifts. Social psychology research indicates that cultural stereotypes about African American students are largely negative. Many respondents associate being Black and male with low intelligence, overt aggression, and violence. Cultural stereotypes of Latino youths also depict them as unintelligent and lacking ambition. Unfortunately, African American and Latino youths often tend to agree with this biased opinion, which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

According to Rena Subotnik (Chapter 9, "Developmental Transitions in Giftedness and Talent: Adolescence Into Adulthood"), giftedness develops over time. She believes that talent development is a set of transitions, transforming abilities into competencies and expertise into outstanding performance. Chance plays an important part in bringing about opportunities; in the apt words of Csikszentmihalyi, "It is important to be at the right place at the right time with the right set of abilities" (as quoted on p. 159).

Study of elderly people is a relatively recent trend, compared with that of child development, which began many years ago. There have been many dramatic changes in the demographics of aging in the last century, resulting in longer life spans and a shift of lifetime employment from single to multiple careers. James Birren attempts to expand the perspective of psychology to include the dynamics of later years in his chapter "Gifts and Talents of Elderly People: The Persimmon's Promise." There is increasing diversity in later life, including the possibility that the experience of a long life can influence survival, although little research has been done on the subject. Vinters (2001, as quoted on p. 174) asked why some older people remain psychologically alert, animated, and active while others deteriorate in their later years. How much does active functioning retard the aging process? Unfortunately, few satisfactory answers are given to these questions, although Albert and Killany (2001, as cited on p. 174) have produced evidence that there are functional neurological changes in the brain as people age.

Others have reported that level of education influences changes in later life and that low linguistic ability in the early years is predictive of lower cognitive functions and Alzheimer's disease in old age (Schaie & Hoffer, 2001, as quoted on p. 175). Nevertheless, studies of overall intellectual functioning are not sufficient to explain extreme differences in late-life functioning. Birren speaks of late-life bloomers and contributes the beautiful metaphor that "the Native American persimmon tree does not yield ripe fruit until after the first frost" (p. 177). Similarly, many older people find their gifts only in their late years.

The lack of attention paid to giftedness among elderly people is society's loss, as they bring many resources with them, such as knowledge and years of experience in family and work life and personal relationships. In my opinion, this section of the book is the least informative. No doubt it is because not enough is known about the aging process. Birren says it well: "It is intriguing to consider what might be derived from future research in creativity, competency, productivity, and wisdom in older persons. Ways may be discovered to release existing yet underused and underexpressed competency and talents" (p. 183).

The Development of Giftedness and Talent Across the Life Span is an innovative compilation of chapters that provides readers with a comprehensive review of where the science of giftedness stands today. It is highly recommended for teachers and educators, psychologists, parents, and everyone interested in the development and maintenance of creativity.

References

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