
Introduction to Definitions and Conceptions of Giftedness

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Just as people have bad habits, so can academic fields have bad habits. A bad habit of much of the gifted field is to do research on giftedness, or worse, identify children as gifted or not gifted, without having a clear conception of what it means to be gifted. We can thereby end up with a label—"giftedness"—that has no clear content. The seminal articles from *Gifted Child Quarterly* in this volume address this issue of what giftedness is. They thereby inform our efforts to do research on giftedness and to identify children as gifted.

What are some of the major issues raised in these articles, and what are examples of some ideas proposed to address each of these issues?

- What is the nature of giftedness and talent?
 - One can learn more about the nature of giftedness through viewing responses to enrichment activities than through conventional tests (Passow, 1981).
 - Giftedness involves excellence, rarity, productivity, demonstrability, and value attached to the skills/products of the individual (Sternberg & Zhang, 1995).
- How should we study giftedness?
 - We need more to use the techniques of mainstream psychological research to study giftedness (Jackson, 1993).

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- Should we expand conventional notions of giftedness, and if so, how should we do so?
 - Metacognition is crucial to giftedness (Shore & Dover, 1987).
 - Creativity is an important facet of giftedness (Runco, 1993).
 - Wisdom is an important kind of giftedness (Sternberg, 2000).
- How, if at all, are giftedness and talent different?
 - Giftedness refers to domains of human abilities, talents, to domains of human accomplishments (Gagné, 1985).
- Are there different profiles of giftedness and talent, and if so, what are they?
 - Six profiles of giftedness and talent are successful, challenging, underground, dropouts, double-labeled, and autonomous (Betts & Neihart, 1988).
 - Different kinds of gifted individuals (e.g., statesmen versus religious leaders) develop through different profiles of strengths and weaknesses (Walberg, Tsai, Weinstein, Gabriel, Rasher, Rosecrans, Rovai, Ide, Trujillo, & Vukosavich, 1981).
- How do giftedness and talent develop?
 - They develop in part through certain kinds of overexcitabilities, namely, psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional (Piechowski & Colangelo, 1984).
 - Prodigies develop in a way that is different from that of most gifted individuals in part as a function of opportunities made available to them in their environments (Feldman, 1993).
 - Giftedness can be understood in part in terms of the interaction of the organism and the environment, which produces diverse developmental outcomes (Horowitz, 1987).
- How valid are available assessments of giftedness and talent?
 - Measures of multiple intelligences appear, in general, to be reliable but not particularly valid (Plucker, Callahan, & Tomchin, 1996).

It would, of course, be delightful if a consensus could be found on all or even many of these issues, but consensus is hard to find. Nevertheless, there appear to be at least several points of broad agreement.

- Giftedness involves more than just high IQ.
- Giftedness has noncognitive (e.g., motivationally driven) components as well as cognitive ones.
- Environment is crucial in terms of whether potentials for gifted performance will be realized.

- Giftedness is not a single thing: There are multiple forms of giftedness. Hence, one-size-fits-all assessments or programs are likely to be too narrow.
- Measures for identifying or evaluating gifted individuals need to be proposed to operationalize theories, and then they need to be evaluated rather than merely being assumed to be valid.

Thus, progress has been made in the definition and conceptualization of giftedness, and series such as this, that this progress will continue into the future. Research that is summarized in these seminal articles raise important points for both researchers and teachers to consider and broadened definitions and conceptions of giftedness will result in more enlightened choices about the decisions we make about who is able to participate in the programs we develop.

I end on a cautionary note. The way we conceptualize giftedness greatly influences who will have greater and lesser opportunities to contribute to future society. People who are identified as gifted are given opportunities to succeed that people who are not so identified are not given. Thus, it is important to consider not only the skills individuals have, but also how they will use them. Will, for example, abilities, in Gagné's sense of the term, be transformed into talents that are useful to society? Will individuals who are intellectually able make creative contributions, or will they merely replicate what is already known, however well they may replicate it? Will able individuals use their knowledge wisely, or for destructive ends? In a world beset by conflict and turmoil, perhaps these are the most important questions we presently need to address.

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