

I'm Not Gifted, I'm Just Busy: Unrecognized Giftedness in Women

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I'm Not Gifted, I'm Just Busy!

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Why is it that we, as women, find the term “gifted” distasteful, and no matter how many degrees, credentials, positions of leadership we attain or accolades we receive, we cannot comfortably call ourselves “gifted women”? I believe this is because, historically, only men could be gifted.

During most of the last 5,000 years, giftedness was reserved for men only and a gifted woman was considered a contradiction in terms. It has been commonly held that women are *naturally* inferior in intelligence to men. The doctrine of the natural inferiority of women has been thoroughly ingrained in human consciousness and has influenced religion, law, philosophy, education and literature worldwide. Many peoples of the world still believe it to be the natural order of the universe. Starr (1991) collected over 600 quotations from the most celebrated men in history to illustrate the pervasiveness of this misogynous theory, e.g.:

It is the law of nature that woman should be held under the dominance of man.
[Confucius ca. 500 B.C.E.] (p. 118)

In human beings, the female foetus is not perfected equally with the male...
For females are weaker and colder in nature, and we must look upon the female character as being a sort of natural deficiency. [Aristotle, 4th Century B.C.E.]
(p. 36)

Scientists in the latter part of the 19th century and early part of the 20th firmly believed that females had a more restricted range of abilities than males, and that this is why there were fewer of them among the retarded population and fewer who achieved eminence. Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1926), the staunch feminist (considered the scientific bulwark of the suffragettes) who founded gifted education, traced the history of these attitudes as far back as the first century.

Girls were assumed to be mentally inferior to boys, as a sex, and to resemble each other closely in intellectual caliber. In illustration of this theory of female homogeneity we find in a panegyric on Murdia, dating from the second half of the first century, the sentiment expressed that the gravestones of women must all be alike, “Because their virtues admit of no heterogeneity, and it is enough that all have shown themselves worthy of the same good report.” (p. 347)

This contention was afforded scientific credibility through the *variability hypothesis*, a legacy of Charles Darwin (1871). Darwin had observed that males of many species had greater differentiation of secondary sex characteristics than females. He believed that variation from the average was the primary means of evolution, and therefore proposed that males were more advanced than females on the evolutionary scale. In 1897, Darwin wrote:

The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shown by man's attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman... whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands. (p. 564)

Darwin's interpretation met with little resistance, since it had been accepted for centuries that women were intellectually inferior to men and that women were all pretty much alike. The eminent Edward L. Thorndike (1910), Leta Stetter Hollingworth's major advisor, proclaimed the prevailing view regarding women's intellectual capacity in one of the most popular texts in psychology:

(In) the great achievements of the world in science, art, invention, and management, women have been far excelled by men... In particular, if men differ in intelligence and energy by wider degrees than do women, eminence in and leadership of the world's affairs of whatever sort will inevitably belong oftener to men. They will oftener deserve it. (p. 35)

Although Leta Stetter Hollingworth, while still a graduate student under Thorndike at Teachers College, Columbia University, was highly successful in dismantling the variability hypothesis, it still remains today in accepted scientific literature and imbedded in the deep structure of men's beliefs about women and our beliefs about our own capabilities.

The "Catch 22" in this reasoning, which Hollingworth was quick to point out, is that women have been barred from attaining eminence for thousands of years, and yet it is our poor representation among the eminent that has supposedly confirmed our lesser abilities. I would like to share with you some more of her impassioned prose on this subject:

It is undesirable to seek for the cause of sex differences in eminence in ultimate and obscure affective and intellectual differences until we have exhausted as a cause the known, obvious and inescapable fact that women bear and rear the children, and that this has had as an inevitable sequel the occupation of housekeeping, a field where eminence is not possible. (Hollingworth, 1914, p. 529)

In another article, Hollingworth described how the interaction of ability and environmental stimulation serve to enhance variability in males and inhibit it in females. She suggested that variability had comparatively little survival value for women:

A woman of natural herculean strength does not wash dishes, cook meals, or rear children much more successfully than a woman of ordinary muscle. But a man of natural herculean strength is free to abandon carpentry or agriculture and become a prize-fighter or a blacksmith, thus exercising and enhancing his native endowment. (Montague & Hollingworth, 1914, p. 343)

Eminence is actually a masculine concept, rooted in hierarchical, patriarchal value structures of power and competition. It is sort of a gentleman's war, with the victor gaining a permanent place in history. Men control the designation of eminence, and decide who will or will not be publicly recognized. Women's contributions have often been of a quieter, less ego-driven nature, like the stitches of a magnificent quilt, raising of children, helping the aged and disabled. It also must be remembered that in many countries women were not even allowed to speak in public until this century.

To be regarded as exceptional is a deeply rewarding experience for a man; not so for a woman. In 1879, LeBon, the founder of social psychology, wrote:

In the most intelligent races...there are a large number of women whose brains are closer in size to those of gorillas than to the most developed male brains. This inferiority is so obvious that no one can contest it for a moment; only its degree is worth discussion. All psychologists who have studied the intelligence of women, as well as poets and novelists, recognize today that they represent the most inferior forms of human evolution and that they are closer to children and savages than to an adult, civilized male. They excel in fickleness, inconstancy, absence of thought and logic; and incapacity to reason. Without doubt there exist some distinguished women, very superior to the average man, but they are as exceptional as the birth of any monstrosity, as for example, a gorilla with two heads; consequently,, we may neglect them entirely.... (as quoted in Gould, 1981, pp. 104-105)

Not only are we branded a “monstrosity” and “unfeminine” if we excel, but the more we achieve, the more we are seen as an “exception” to what women are capable of achieving. Rossiter (1982), in *Women Scientists in America*, describes how Marie Curie, winner of two Nobel prizes, was set up as the standard for all academic women, and any woman who had not attained such prestige was deemed unworthy of being hired, promoted, compensated appropriately for her work, or supported in her research endeavors. It is easy to understand why women are not eager to support the success of other women. Success comes at too high a price, not only for the high achieving woman, but also for all other women. And it is easy to see how even the idea of being considered a “gifted” woman by others might cause us to wince. It separates us from other women, putting us in the position of causing even greater hardship to our gender by breaking the curve and creating even higher hurdles for other women to jump.

At the Gifted Development Center, we are redefining the term “gifted” from a feminine perspective, one that removes it from the external realm of potential for eminence and focuses on the inner experience of the gifted person.

Giftedness is **asynchronous development** in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (The Columbus Group, 1991)

The focus of the definition is on developmental differences rather than performance and achievement. Elsewhere, I have described this distinction as a feminine vs. a masculine perspective of giftedness (Silverman, 1986). From a phenomenological view, giftedness exists with or without achievement, in the discrepancy between mental and physical development. Uneven development is a universal characteristic of giftedness, unrelated to cultural norms. The IQ test, which remains the best assessment of giftedness in girls, provides a minimal estimate of the degree of asynchrony. Terman (1916) found that girls surpassed boys at every age level until age 14 on the old Binet (the most gender-unconscious instrument imaginable).

The Columbus Group definition also recognizes the emotional component of giftedness—the inextricability of cognitive complexity with emotional intensity. The enhanced awareness and moral sensitivity derived from this combination make gifted children vulnerable. This idea and the masculine vs. feminine perspective of giftedness ensued from listening to parents of gifted children. I began to notice that mothers usually called the Gifted Development

Center to inquire about testing, while fathers often viewed the assessment with skepticism. When I spoke to parent groups, mothers would nod and smile and fathers would sit with crossed arms and question marks on their faces. One father came up to me after a presentation and told me about his son who had won all kinds of awards as a scholar at Stanford University, but he, too, was certain his son wasn't gifted. I asked him, "What would he have to do to be gifted in your eyes?" The father retorted, "Well, he's no Einstein."

Then I came across a study in which the researcher thought mothers labeled one child in the family as gifted for their own "narcissistic needs." An incidental finding of this study was that when the school had labeled the child, "gifted," the mothers believed the label and the fathers denied it, which led to marital conflict (Cornell, 1984). That was when I realized that mothers and fathers were defining giftedness differently. The more I thought about it, the clearer it seemed that the male writers in the field tended to view giftedness very much like the fathers I had run across and most female writers seemed to share the perspective of the mothers.

Men equate giftedness with achievement. After we tested his son, one Dad said to us, "He's only five. What could he have **done** in five years to be gifted?" Women, on the other hand, perceive giftedness as **developmental advancement**. If a Mom sees that her daughter is asking names of objects at 11 months, and memorizing books at 17 months, and asking complex questions before she's two years old, she gets very anxious. "How will she **fit in** with the other children?" "What will the teacher do with her if she's already reading in Kindergarten?" "Should I hide the books? I don't want them to think I'm another 'pushy parent'." Developing faster than other children makes a child vulnerable, and mothers are keenly aware of this vulnerability. When they can ignore it no longer, when the fear of "What will happen to my child?" rises in their throats, they gulp twice and call a specialist for guidance on their child's unique developmental progress [with one part of them screaming in their heads, "Do you realize how foolish you're going to look if you're wrong and this is all in your head?"]. But despite the myth that "All parents think their children are gifted," 9 out of 10 of the parents who break down and make that phone call are right.

The achievement view of giftedness has been with us from the very beginning, with Sir Francis Galton's (1869) study of eminent men. Today, educators are still looking for children who have the potential to be "eminent men." The eminent child in school is the winner of the competition for grades and awards. All the emphasis is placed on products, performance, portfolios—the external trappings. And the child is expected to keep up the hard work throughout life, performing, producing, achieving. So "gifted" has become the label bestowed by schools on "task committed," hard working students who get good grades. Clearly, these are the students with the greatest potential for achievement in our competitive society. Is that what giftedness is all about?

No, the Moms are right. Giftedness is a developmental difference that can be observed in early childhood. But the problem is that the child doesn't advance equally in all areas. As she asks what happens after you die and "How do we know we aren't part of someone else's dream?" she still can't tie her shoes! An eleven-year-old highly gifted boy got off the plane with his calculus book in one hand and his well-worn Curious George in the other. The higher the child's IQ, the more difficulty he or she has finding playmates or conforming to the lock-step school curriculum. The greater the discrepancy between a child's strengths and weaknesses, the harder it is for him or her to fit in anywhere. "Am I smart or stupid?" According to one Colorado study, at least half of the parents had no idea their children were gifted, and when the parents didn't recognize it, the school didn't either (Dickinson, 1970).

Gifted children and adults see the world differently because of the complexity of their thought processes and their emotional intensity. People often say to them, “Why do you make everything so complicated?” “Why do you take everything so seriously?” “Why is everything so important to you?” The gifted are “too” everything: too sensitive, too intense, too driven, too honest, too idealistic, too moral, too perfectionistic, too much for other people! Even if they try their entire lives to fit in, they still feel like misfits. The damage we do to gifted children and adults by ignoring this phenomenon is far greater than the damage we do by labeling it. Without the label for their differences, the gifted come up with their own label: “I must be **crazy**. No one else is upset by this injustice but me.”

Mothers of gifted children rarely recognize their own giftedness. I would like a dollar for every mother who has sat in my office and said, “He gets it from his **father**” or “I’m **only** a mother. I haven’t **done** anything gifted.” Several years ago I put together a workshop entitled, “Whoever Heard of a Gifted Mommy?” I asked the participants to choose a partner and draw out their partner’s giftedness, then introduce their partner to the group. The themes that emerged from that exercise included *intense moral commitment, a greater capacity for empathy; unique perception and awareness; respect for all human beings; searching for truth; insightfulness; creativity; multipotentiality; ability to juggle many things at once*, etc.

Whenever giftedness is equated with achievement, we miss truly gifted women. Hollingworth (1926) asked Galton in mock conversations, “If eminence is completely dependent on heredity, what happened to the sisters of all the great men?” They never had the opportunity to gain universal acclaim. But they were still gifted. They put their talents into childrearing, housekeeping, fashions, or nurturing men. Some taught themselves to read and read voraciously without producing new knowledge. And some broke through the binding constraints of propriety to bring us to where we are today. Only a small fraction of these women attained eminence in a man’s world. However, all the other nameless gifted women who have fought for Selfhood in their generation and for ours are also worthy of our profound respect and admiration.

It’s time we took giftedness out of the closet and separated it entirely from the concept of achievement. It’s time we recognized it, valued it and nurtured it in our schools and our families. As a parent wrote in an issue of *Understanding Our Gifted*, “Every gift contains a danger. Whatever gift we have we are compelled to express. And if the expression of that gift is blocked, distorted, or merely allowed to languish, then the gift turns against us, and we suffer” (Johnson, 1993, p. 15).

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