Johnny, a 9-year-old elementary school student, has an IQ of 140, which would qualify him as “gifted” by virtually any IQ-based definition of giftedness anyone might use. Johnny has few friends, in large part because he has very poor social skills. Johnny has no hobbies to speak of, and is unengaged in significant extracurricular activities outside of school. And despite his IQ, Johnny is a good, but not great, student.

Davy is also 9 and is in the same school as Johnny. He has an IQ of 120, which would qualify him as “gifted” by some, but not other IQ-based definitions of giftedness. Davy is very active in sports and is the best soccer player of any age in his school. He also is a highly talented trombonist, and is first trombone in the elementary-school orchestra. His teacher believes he has the potential for a career in musical performance, should he wish to follow that path. Davy is very popular and is one of the top three academic performers in his class.

Who is gifted? Johnny? Davy? Both? Or neither? In answering this question, four things must be kept in mind.

First, “giftedness” is a label—nothing more. We are frequently asked whether such-and-such or so-and-so child is gifted. The answer depends on the criteria one sets. But there is no one absolute or “correct” set of criteria. Criteria for such labeling are a matter of opinion, nothing more, and there are many disagreements as to how the label should be applied.

Second, the label can be applied in either a more general or a more specific way. The more general way implies that giftedness is relatively general across many domains—that is, someone is either gifted or not. On this view, someone who is gifted is gifted very broadly. The more specific way implies that giftedness is something that is potentially limited to one or several narrow domains—for example, verbal skills; or within the verbal domain, writing skills; or within the writing domain, fiction-writing skills. Indeed, relatively few successful fiction writers are also successful nonfiction writers, and vice versa.
Third, conceptions of giftedness can and do change over time and place. At times in the past, a child’s ability rapidly to learn classical Greek and Latin might be viewed as an important sign of giftedness. Today, such an ability generally would be relatively less valued. Similarly, the skills that lead a child to be labeled as gifted might be different in a hunting and gathering village in rural Tanzania than in urban Los Angeles.

Fourth, conceptions of giftedness can be based on either explicit theories or implicit theories of giftedness. An explicit theory is one proposed by a scientist or educator who has studied giftedness and has arrived at a conception of giftedness that has been subject to some kind of empirical test. An implicit theory is simply a layperson’s conception of a phenomenon. It has no explicit scientific basis. It might be looked at as a “pragmatic” conception rather than as one based on rigorous research.

As we review conceptions of giftedness, keep in mind the four constraints above. The chapter does not provide final “answers,” because there are no such answers. Rather, each reader will have to decide for him- or herself which conception or conceptions he or she finds to be compelling.

First Wave: Domain-General Models

Many of the earliest giftedness researchers investigated the scientific basis of giftedness from a domain-general perspective, using the words “gifted,” “genius,” and “talented” almost interchangeably. It is completely reasonable to begin a scientific investigation of a topic in this manner, and the work of these “first wave” pioneers laid an important foundation for future research on the nature of giftedness and talent.

Francis Galton’s book *Hereditary Genius* (1869) was one of the first public outlets to present a theory of genius. Galton conceptualized genius as “an ability that was exceptionally high and at the same time inborn” (Galton, 1892, p. viii). He garnered support for his theory by analyzing the family lineage of distinguished European men. He found that genius ran in families, and concluded from this that genius must be genetically inherited, in much the same way as physical attractiveness. Galton’s estimation (as opposed to measurement) of genius was ostensibly subjective, using indices such as enduring reputation. Galton’s technique had limited effectiveness for an understanding of giftedness in young people (in part because he focused on genius-level individuals), but he nonetheless set the gears in motion for the scientific study of giftedness.

At the turn of the twentieth century, English psychologist Charles Spearman (1904) noticed that a wide variety of cognitive tests tend to positively correlate with each other. Using his newly developed statistical technique of factor analysis, he determined that there is a significant amount of common variance across all of the tests, with some variance specific to each test. He called the pervasive ability $g$, or general intelligence, and each of the specific abilities $s$. Spearman viewed $g$ as general and innate (i.e., as having a strong physical substrate), much in line with Galton’s view on the hereditary basis of genius. He later proposed that the general factor was a result of “mental energy” (Spearman, 1927).

Around the same time Spearman discovered the $g$ factor, Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon (1916) were developing a mental scale to identify students in need