Chapter 5

A Feminine Perspective of Giftedness

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Abstract  The feminine perspective, the legacy of Leta Hollingworth, focuses on developmental differences in childhood and equal opportunity. The masculine perspective, the legacy of Francis Galton, equates giftedness with eminence. Women, economically disadvantaged, and culturally diverse groups do not have the same opportunities to attain eminence. The lack of eminent women has been attributed to Darwin’s variability hypothesis: since males are more variable than females, more males are assumed to be at the extremes of intelligence, whereas women tend toward the mean. In 1914, Leta Hollingworth completely discredited this hypothesis. Research for 100 years has demonstrated that there are at least as many gifted girls as boys—even in the highest IQ ranges. Men now disparage IQ tests. Internationally, the field still defines giftedness as the potential for eminence. This chapter discusses masculine and feminine conceptions, the development of gifted girls, and barriers for girls from culturally diverse and low socioeconomic circumstances.

Keywords Giftedness · Eminent women · Gifted girls · IQ testing · Diversity · Cultural diversity · Economic Diversity · Sexism · Gender equality

Introduction

The proposal that men and women perceive giftedness differently was put forth in the chapter, “What Happens to the Gifted Girl?” (Silverman, 1986). In some respects, this chapter is an update of the previous one, incorporating information about cultural diversity. We will review the origins of the masculine and feminine perceptions of giftedness and current conceptions and discuss the issues facing girls of diverse cultural backgrounds and those of limited economic circumstances.

How Fathers and Mothers Perceive Giftedness

The idea of masculine and feminine perspectives originated from observing differing attitudes of mothers and fathers of gifted children. Over the last 30 years, 5,600 families have come to the Gifted Development Center in Denver, Colorado, USA, for assessment. The vast majority of those who have initiated contact with the Center are mothers—although this picture is gradually shifting. During the first 10 years, fathers often had to be coaxed into agreeing to have their children tested. At first blush, this sounds perfectly reasonable, as children’s education traditionally has been the realm of mothers and finances the realm of fathers. However, deeper, philosophical differences often surfaced in the reactions of the parents during post-test conferences. While mothers were relieved to have their suspicions confirmed with the testing, some fathers viewed the test results with skepticism. After we tested his son, one Dad remarked, “He’s only 5. What could he have done in 5 years to be gifted?” Other fathers had similar reactions. A physician asked if the error of measurement was 28 points, because he would have been more comfortable subtracting 28 points from his son’s IQ. When he was informed that the margin of error was around 5 points and that this meant his son’s IQ score might be 5...
One might guess that the skepticism was monetarily motivated: “Why am I paying for this?” However, fathers who attended parent seminars—some of which were free—had comparable attitudes to the Dads who were clients. After one presentation, a father mentioned that his daughter was reading several years above grade level, but he was “sure” she was not gifted. Another Dad described all the awards his son had won at Stanford University, but, he, too, was certain his son was not gifted. When asked “What would he have to do to be gifted in your eyes?” the man quickly retorted, “Well, he’s no Einstein!”

Cornell (1983) had an analogous finding. Parents often disagreed about whether their child was gifted or not, and the side each parent was on was predictable:

...in cases in which the parents disagree in their perception of the child, it is almost always (13 of 15 cases) the mother who perceives the child as gifted and the father who does not... (p. 329)
...The fathers in this study often commented skeptically on their wives’ perception of their children as gifted. (p. 332)

Attempting to understand the basis of the differing viewpoints of these mothers and fathers, it seemed plausible that there could be “distinct masculine and feminine perspectives of giftedness” (Silverman, 1986, p. 56). As we shall see later on, the masculine viewpoint can be held by women and the feminine viewpoint can be held by men, but they seem to emerge from traditional differences in the life experiences of men and women. Men who define themselves by their achievements tend to conceptualize giftedness as achievement or the potential for achievement. From this perspective, to be gifted, one must be recognized by one’s culture as having contributed something of lasting value. The true test of one’s abilities is the quantity, quality, and influence of one’s accomplishments in adult life—often determined by the number of biographies written about an individual (T. Goertzel & Hansen, 2004). It follows that there are no gifted children. There can only be promising children with the potential for greatness.

For a Dad who holds this picture of giftedness, predicting which children will be the most influential adults is a bizarre game of chance, and assessment of that potential in a young child makes little sense. In fact, it seems like a cruel game, particularly for a boy, because if his son is selected for “the potentially eminent group,” he may be set up for failure—a life of unbearable pressures and false hopes. The father’s protective reaction, therefore, is to deny his son’s giftedness. “I don’t want to rob him of his childhood.”

By way of contrast, if the mother is the child’s primary caretaker, she is apt to experience on a daily basis the dynamic development of her children. She is more likely than her husband to notice if her child is progressing faster through the developmental milestones. Mothers have been found in various parts of the world who observed developmental differences in beginning their children in infancy (Alomar, 2003; Louis & Lewis, 1992). If, at the age of 11 months, her daughter begins asking the names of objects, and if, at 17 months, she is memorizing books, Mom is initially delighted. But when she takes her daughter to a playgroup, delight may turn to anxiety. The mother cannot help but notice that her child is talking in sentences before the other children in the playgroup are combining two words. Awareness of the developmental differences between her child and other children grows into uneasiness. She may wonder, “How will she fit in with the other children?” “Will she be lonely?” “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.’” “Are we doing enough to nurture her abilities?” Questions like these may eventually lead her to seek professional guidance and assessment of her child’s abilities. But taking that step is not easy—particularly without her partner’s support.

When she can no longer ignore the child’s advanced vocabulary and incessant questions, the mother’s fear of “What will happen to my child?” overrides her fear of looking foolish if she has overestimated her child’s abilities. It takes courage to find out just how advanced one’s child might be. As she picks up the phone, a voice in her head is screaming, “What if you’re wrong? All parents think their children are gifted!” In truth, few parents think their children are gifted and want them labeled (Feldhusen, 1998). Parents are actually more likely to underestimate than overestimate their gifted children’s abilities (Munger, 1990; Rogers, 1986). But the myth persists.

For Dad, a child only has the “potential” for giftedness; the child’s giftedness has yet to be proved by means of adult achievements. For Mom, potential for achievement is not the salient issue. She is concerned with her child’s adjustment now, in childhood, and she