

Goodness Personified



The Emergence of Gifted Children



Leslie Margolin



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Leslie Margolin is Assistant Professor, Department of Counselor Education, University of Iowa. His research on children and adolescents has been widely published in professional journals. Dr. Margolin received his M.S.W. from Hunter College and his Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska.

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For Mary, Josie, Jamie, and Andrew

The guide-post which first put me on the *right* track was this question—what is the true etymological significance of the various symbols for the idea “good” which have been coined in the various languages? I then found that they all led back to *the same evolution of the same idea*—that everywhere “aristocrat,” “noble” (in the social sense), is the root idea, out of which have necessarily developed “good” in the sense of “with aristocratic soul,” “noble,” in the sense of “with a soul of high calibre,” “with a privileged soul”—a development which invariably runs parallel with that other evolution by which “vulgar,” “plebeian,” “low,” are made to change finally into “bad.”

Friedrich Nietzsche
Genealogy of Morals

Preface

In this book I attempt to tell several different stories: the story of a social movement; of a particular educational practice; of hidden racism and classism; of upper middle-class ideals and obsessions; of language and rhetoric; of the relation of virtue to power. I also represent an effort to appropriate and blend two rather different styles of writing and analysis: American ethnomethodology and the aesthetics of Nietzsche and Foucault.

I chose gifted child education as the target of this blending quite by accident. About three years ago, when I was having some difficulty finding a job in sociology, the College of Education at The University of Iowa offered me a home. When I arrived, I was intrigued by educators' confidence in the existence of certain special populations of children. In particular, I was fascinated by how often and how easily they talked about gifted children. I wondered how and why they were able to do that.

Several people helped me in this inquiry. First, I wish to thank Merry Morash, the editor of *Social Problems*, for putting together a wonderful team of reviewers for the article, also titled "Goodness Personified" (*Social Problems* 40:510–532, 1993), that led to the book. Reviews by Richard A. Hilbert, Melvin Pollner, Dorothy Pawluch, and Steven J. Taylor were incredibly helpful. Two chapters of the book were presented at The University of Iowa's Project on the Rhetoric of Inquiry, resulting in lots of encouragement and interesting suggestions. Rick Fumerton was quite helpful in his review of Chapter 7. Joel Best provided a great deal of support and many valuable suggestions for the entire book. Melvin Pollner also reviewed the entire book, providing detailed criticism and analysis. I particularly wish to thank James C. Kimberly and Carl J. Couch for their inspiring teaching and friendship.

The staff of the Connie Belin National Center for Gifted Education were very generous in allowing me to use their research library and to incorporate their materials. Special thanks to Virginia Travis and Reta Litton for their excellent typing and clerical assistance.

To my wife, Mary, and my children, Josie, Jamie, and Andrew, I owe the greatest debt. To them, with love, I dedicate this book.

Introduction

The book's title, *Goodness Personified*, is taken from the way gifted child experts portray these children. According to them, the gifted are not characterized by having some specific ability, but by having all abilities. They are portrayed as a distinct class of human beings superior to non-gifted children in every way. This book's central questions are: By what means have we been persuaded that such children exist? Who benefits by this belief? And how is this belief sustained although it clashes with the commonsense reality in which there are no consistently virtuous children but merely ordinary children with their share of virtues and vices, strengths and weaknesses?

Despite widespread questioning in the academic literature of the various methods used to conceptualize, describe, and identify human intelligence, giftedness and gifted education have somehow managed to escape comparable critical analysis. Perhaps because sociologists focus on "deviance," "social problems," and other troubling phenomena, they have considered giftedness outside their field of interest.¹ As a result, gifted education has been studied mostly by insiders with a stake in seeing gifted education continue: gifted child educators themselves. Although gifted education currently serves over 5% of all school-age children and represents an enormous and complex source of social influence, it has rarely been examined by social scientists who are not members of the gifted child movement.

Seven academic journals specialize in studies of gifted children.² Yet, there are no studies on the social construction of giftedness. Researchers who study gifted children attempt to determine their characteristics, but neglect the approach utilized in deviance and social problems research (Best 1987, 1989; Blumer 1971; Gusfield 1981; Spector and Kitsuse 1977) of studying the ways conceptions of such characteristics are developed. Thus, researchers have addressed the etiology of giftedness but not the etiology of the meaning of giftedness. They ask how the gifted can be recognized, how many gifted there are, how giftedness is supported

and produced, but so far no one has asked how giftedness became a possibility. The emergence of giftedness as a recognized, enforceable social category has never been explored.

We “know” that gifted children exist, or more exactly, we know we can talk about gifted children. However, we do not inquire into how we developed this knowledge and capacity; rather, we accept the appearance and existence of gifted children without inquiring into the processes that created our perceptions. As members of society, we take the existence of gifted children for granted because we routinely hear these words used in standard, stable, typical ways. We are everywhere confronted by gifted children, gifted child educators, classes, theories, and stories. As sociologists, however, we must challenge these understandings. We must ask how gifted children can possibly exist as a social category. We must ask how people could possibly come to believe in the existence of gifted children.

Since Foucault (1977a, 1980) argued that power in contemporary society is becoming increasingly “positive”—that is, less a matter of coercion than of inducing and seducing—an examination of how a positive concept such as giftedness is established may offer a key to understanding modern social control (see Stanley Cohen 1985; Gross 1970; Rodger 1988). However, this examination is precarious because, unlike repressive forms of control where power operates self-consciously, where there is a clear distinction between the deviant and the agent, positive power operates invisibly and effortlessly. Among gifted child educators, for example, there is little awareness of who the objects and agents of control are, or that social control is operating at all. The prevailing voices speak only in terminologies of liberation, self-actualization, and creative freedom. In the words of gifted child scholars, “Children who produce and create well beyond our expectations invigorate us and show us the possibilities of human potential. . . . In our own experience we have never met teachers more excited about teaching than when they work with gifted children” (Colangelo and Davis 1991, p. 4).

Because giftedness represents the nonproblematic and virtuous, it is taken for granted. Like Schutz’s (1945, p. 370) conception of “home,” virtue represents the familiar, the reassuring, the unquestioned and unquestionable, “a set of traditions, habits, institutions, timetables for activities of all kinds” that can be used to master the problems of daily life. Attributions of virtue thus represent a sanctuary from uncertainty, a place where critical analysis appears out of place, illegitimate. And, in Foucault’s scheme, virtue’s capacity to reassure is precisely what makes it essential to sociological interpretation: virtue conceals power.

It may also be difficult to associate the gifted and their activities with social control given the belief that positive labeling promotes self-esteem and achievement—the “Pygmalion effect” (Cooper and Good 1983; Ro-

senthal and Jacobson 1968). Nonetheless, the fact that positive labels are selectively assigned implies that some groups are given fewer advantages than others. In this regard, it is noteworthy that, although African-American children make up 16% of the nation's school enrollment, only 8% of the students in programs for the gifted are of African-American descent (*New York Times* 1988). By implication, the selective distribution of positive labels in our schools parallels and supports the class differences and racial discrimination found in society as a whole (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Lawler 1978; Mensh and Mensh 1991).

Another, and perhaps more subtle, way in which positive labeling results in social control is that use of the positive implicitly constructs its negation. Good and evil are mutually defined; each is meaningful only in relation to the other. Thus, discourse on the gifted only occurs alongside an implied (or explicit) discourse on the nongifted. And one can easily argue that any distinction between levels of worth is not only a matter of degree, that is, a comparison in terms of better or worse; it is absolute or categorical (Douglas 1970, p. 5). Establishing the gifted as a social type also establishes the nongifted as a social type. However, unlike other "dividing practices" (Foucault 1965, 1973, 1977a) whereby abnormals are defined and segregated from normals (e.g., the insane from the sane, the sick from the healthy, the criminal from the law-abiding), here the social hierarchy is formed by attention to the positive idealization. This is consistent with Foucault's (1977a, pp. 304, 183) characterization of the modern "disciplines" as primarily engaged in "making" people, as procedures used to assign qualities and characteristics to human individuals. In Foucault's (1977a, p. 170) words, theirs "is the specific technique of power that regards individuals as both the objects and instruments of its exercise."

Because the categories used to identify people are taken for granted, they lead us to "see" the expected types as natural, as the only possible reality. They minimize and obscure differences among people belonging to the same categories and similarities to those not so categorized (Bogdan and Taylor, 1982, p. 13). Moreover, because the categories used to identify "good" people are the least likely to be recognized in terms of the decisions and constitutive work that produced them, they are least likely to be challenged. Positive labels not only prevent awareness of alternative ways of seeing people, but also deflect and resist scrutiny as historical, cultural accomplishments.

A SUDDEN CONVERGENCE

Scholars' writings on the gifted may be a particularly good example of "people making," as there was no public discourse on gifted children till

social scientists first named and described them during the second and third decades of the twentieth century.³ At the beginning of the twentieth century, stories of “child prodigies” appeared with increasing regularity in magazines and newspapers, but these children were seen as curiosities, more as accidents of nature or individualistic anomalies than as representatives of a stable class of people.⁴ It was not until psychologists such as Lewis M. Terman, Henry H. Goddard, and Leta S. Hollingworth began reporting “findings” on gifted children that this social category received widespread acceptance. By making giftedness appear predictable, orderly, and explainable, psychologists assimilated the gifted into natural law and made it possible to include them in everyday discourse.

Psychologists’ interest in assessing differences in children’s intellectual capacities can be traced to the sudden swelling of the school population at the turn of the century.⁵ Between 1890 and 1915, the public elementary school enrollment in the United States increased by 47% (Chapman 1988, p. 42). The new students included children previously in the labor force before compulsory education and child labor laws were passed and the vast number of children who had recently migrated from rural areas of the United States and eastern Europe. The sudden influx of these populations meant that the school systems not only had to provide for large numbers of new students, but also that they had to deal with students from diverse cultural backgrounds, many of whom spoke different languages (Oakes 1985, pp. 19–21). On top of everything else, a large proportion of these new students were beyond normal school entry age. These “overage” students presented an enormous challenge to teachers, because they did not fit into the first grade, yet because of their academic deficiency, they could not be placed anywhere else. As a result, the first grade in most urban elementary schools was enormously overpopulated, while the more advanced grades were proportionally underused. To illustrate the scope of this bottleneck, in 1904 the superintendent of New York City schools noted that 39% of the students were above the expected age for their grades (Ayres 1909). Three years later, the Russell Sage Foundation surveyed 30 cities to determine the percentage of overage children in their school systems and found percentages ranging from 19% to 51% (Ayres 1914). Given such numbers and the strain on the educational systems, educators began to discuss methods for distinguishing overage children who could catch up from those who could not. They reasoned that if children’s learning potential or intelligence could be estimated, teachers’ attention could be channeled to those students more likely to advance. Thus, pressure to allocate limited educational resources created interest in methods for distinguishing and separating students with low, average, and above average, native capacities (Chapman 1988).

We should also note a shift in the valuation of children at the turn of the century: "from 'object of utility' to object of sentiment and from producer asset to consumer good" (Zelizer 1981, p. 1036). The clearest documentation of this change comes from the data on children's labor force participation. A conservative estimate placed 1,750,178 children or slightly over 18% of those between 10 and 15 years old in the labor force in 1900. By 1930, however, that number had shrunk to 667,118 children. This change was even more pronounced among 10- to 13-year-olds, 186,358 of whom were in the labor force in 1900, whereas only 30,000, or one-sixth that number, were in the labor force in 1930 (Sanderson 1974; Zelizer 1986). Thus, although children were a significant economic resource to their families in nineteenth-century America, "contributing income in normal times, and supporting their families in especially difficult times" (Goldin 1981, p. 284), in twentieth-century America the basis for parent-child relations appeared as something more emotional and sentimental (Dizard and Gadlin 1990). In keeping with these new imperatives, we will see how emotional, sentimental images energized and infused discourse on gifted children.

Still, it would be a mistake to believe that these were the only ways children were seen. From the perspective of education and industry, children had not suddenly become economically useless or emotionally priceless. Although humanitarian groups led by Felix Adler, Florence Kelley, and Jane Addams lobbied for effective child labor legislation by appealing to people's affectional and sentimental regard for exploited children (Sanderson 1974), close inspection of these efforts reveals a pragmatic appeal: What sort of citizens and workers are we providing for tomorrow, reformers asked, if we do not protect and educate our children today? In this regard, educators and social critics such as John Dewey (1916) and Charles Eliot (1909) argued that a modern democratic society not only requires a healthy, informed electorate but also a workforce sufficiently sophisticated to master the complications of new technologies. Thus, the impulse to pull children from sweatshops and place them in schools was not based solely on sentiment and Christian piety but also was rooted in the new perception of children as long-term social and economic capital. As capital, they had to generate profit. And to accomplish this, they should be trained and used according to their capabilities. They had to be ranked, judged, categorized more precisely than ever before.

These practical considerations ignited experts' interest in how to sort children according to their intellectual capacities. However, the eugenics movement provided this discourse's form and direction. By 1914, the year of the first National Conference on Race Betterment, the eugenics movement had become a major influence over educators, medical pro-

professionals, and charitable organizations (Hofstadter 1959). From Galton's (1869, 1883, 1889) first inquiries into human heredity, there was a growing fascination in the United States with identifying, protecting, and preserving genetically superior cultural and racial groups. As the first chapter shows, the eugenicist identification of superiority or "fitness" with membership in the upper classes and white race was shared by gifted child experts and was critical to their understanding of giftedness (Hofstadter 1959, pp. 161–167).

Another intellectual current that influenced the emergence of gifted child discourse was social Darwinism. Although Darwin is usually credited with the expression "survival of the fittest," Herbert Spencer first used it in 1852 to explain people's intellectual evolution. Spencer, and other social Darwinists such as William Graham Sumner, reasoned that if the most intelligent and skillful people have the best chances of surviving, then the population should increase in intelligence with each successive generation (Hofstadter 1959, p. 39). The significance of this mode of reasoning was that it provided a way of seeing intelligent people as something other than accidents of nature. From this perspective, intelligent people were not only the inevitable outcome of the adaptation to the environment, but also they now had a moral dimension. They could be seen as the achievement or favorable end product of the struggle to survive, whereas the stupid, weak, and malformed could be seen as the negative residue. Thus, social Darwinism provided the soon-to-emerge "gifted children's" movement with a theoretical framework for expecting profound differences in children's mental capacity, for interpreting these differences as genetically determined, and for responding to them with differential solicitude, with brighter children seen as a natural aristocracy, deserving better treatment because nature—not God or tradition or birth—had endowed them with special qualities.

Finally, we should note the invention of the intelligence test by Binet in 1908 and the astonishing speed with which it moved from its creation in France to mass use in the United States. Consider this chronology: In 1909, only one year after Binet introduced the test, it was translated into English by Henry Goddard who immediately began administering it to the "feeble-minded" (Mensh and Mensh 1991, pp. 25–26). In 1912, the U.S. Public Health Service commissioned Goddard to administer the test to new arrivals at Ellis Island. Four years later, Lewis Terman published an adaptation of the Binet test for general school usage. In 1917, 1.75 million American soldiers were given the IQ test. And in 1919 alone, over half a million copies of the "National Intelligence Test" were sold to psychologists and educators (Kevles 1985, p. 82). Apparently, large segments of these professional groups grasped IQ technology as if it were the social and educational equivalent of Newtonian physics and Galilean

mechanics. For them, the IQ test was the “Christopher Columbus’s egg”⁶ of intelligence, the innovation that would finally allow them to master prodigious children, to possess them completely and definitely.

What marks the origins of giftedness, then, is a sudden convergence, the extreme rapidity of a progress that could hardly have been anticipated; a mode of discourse that seemed to spring from everything and nothing. This book tells how this discourse took root and survived.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

Conceptualizing gifted child experts’ findings as accounts (Garfinkel 1967; Hilbert 1990; Zimmerman and Wieder 1970), that is, as an effort to shape people’s belief in giftedness, I deliberately avoid the question of whether there “really” are gifted children or whether the methods used to describe them are empirically valid. Rather, I am interested in the ways experts see, describe, and explain gifted children. The purpose of this methodological stance is to specify the language and imagery used to make the concept *gifted children* appear representative of something real, obdurate, and objective. Put somewhat differently, this book explores the methods used to display gifted children as objects of nature rather than of human imagination, as something discovered rather than something created. This book, then, is not about the “emergence” of a new vocabulary or a new class of people. Nor is it primarily a description of claims made in conjunction with the gifted child label. Instead, this book examines the methods by which and through which claims about an intended object—the gifted—were (and are) taken as true (Zimmerman and Pollner 1970).

Given giftedness’s intimate association with scholarly activity, much of this book focuses on a group of players—scholars, researchers, social scientists—who have received little attention in the sociological and social movement literatures. Most discussions of the cultural formulation of social problems focus on the press and other popular media; however, social issues are also advocated within the framework of scientific writing.⁷ Although scholars are usually portrayed as the disinterested interpreters of social change, here they are portrayed as a dynamic force in their own right. I examine how scholars’ investigations defined, legitimated, and inspired gifted child activities and campaigns. I pay particular attention to the writings of Leta Stetter Hollingworth and Lewis Terman, because they are widely recognized as the “mother” and “father”

of the gifted child movement (Davis and Rimm 1989, p. 6). Although Henry Goddard is more famous for his writings on "feeble-mindedness" than "giftedness," he is highlighted here to emphasize the linkage between these discourses.

However, the book makes clear that scholars are not the only players engaged in "making" gifted children. As shown in Chapter 1, scholars require a receptive audience, and, as noted in the other chapters, gifted children appear to require educators, therapists, counselors, programs, government intervention, parental support, and more. Given the variety of voices engaged in attributing qualities to gifted children, I consider the spectrum of images and expectations that have dominated this discourse and the likelihood that these definitions legitimize the power and serve the interests of some, rather than other, cultural groups. Following Foucault (1977b, p. 203), I presume that historical origins are more derisive and ironic than lofty, that self-interest comes before knowledge, and that knowledge is an instrument of self-interest.

My methodology: I make no distinction between establishing the truth of a social category and the ascription of particular qualities to members of that category. Although there is a difference between the argument that witches can fly and the argument that witches exist, it is also true that when we start talking about whether witches can or cannot fly, we are simultaneously affirming, constructing, defining the category *witches*. Our belief in social categories depends on instances, detail, events, activities. Abstractions have no life of their own. Certainly we can refer to "witches" in general; however, we start believing in them when they are seen; when stories are told about them; when they are described. Consider Heritage's (1984, pp. 84–86) discussion of sense making: Every social object is constituted as a unity from a succession of images generated over time; every social category, regardless of how general or finite, is permeated with temporal specifications: "Social objects such as 'a cheerful person' or 'a woman walking down to the shops' are the products of complicated judgements in which an 'underlying pattern' is built up from a temporally qualified succession of appearances" (p. 86). Although social categories are not themselves perceptions, they are the framework of relations in which all perceptions tally: "If a sick man sees the devil, he sees at the same time his smell, his flames and smoke, because the significant unity 'devil' is precisely that acrid, fire-and-brimstone essence. There is a symbolism in the thing which links each sensible quality to the rest" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 319).

In keeping with this point of view, Chapter 1 examines how scholars "assembled" gifted children piece by piece, how they provided detailed documentation of the gifted's characteristics, and managed to spread that vision to a community of believers. Because this social category did

not receive widespread public acceptance until psychologists such as Lewis Terman, Henry Goddard, and Leta Stetter Hollingworth reported on gifted children, the book begins by examining the ways these writers represented gifted children.⁸

Chapter 2 deals with continuities and discontinuities in later gifted child writings. In particular, we note that, although early gifted child scholars emphasized the superiority of the white upper classes and the inferiority of dark-skinned and working-class peoples, contemporary scholars stridently disavow racist, classist postures. I argue, however, that these disavowals mask what may be a fundamental continuity in this discourse. Despite the current discussion of “cultural relativism,” “pluralism,” and “inclusion,” within gifted child education, the themes of racism and classism are still evident.

In setting forth the characteristics of giftedness and of the educational systems most befitting gifted children, scholars were not only engaged in “people making,” that is, they were not only engaged in attributing characteristics to a new category of people, but also they were engaged in recruiting advocates. They were continually motivating people to do something about and for gifted children. This theme constitutes the main topic of Chapters 3 and 4. As shown in Chapter 3, gifted child scholars galvanized a social movement by portraying the sufferings of gifted children denied appropriate recognition, support, and educational programming. This line of rhetoric dramatized the “plight” of the gifted as child victims, as a population acutely vulnerable to various forms of harm and deprivation.

A second, more utilitarian line of rhetoric aimed at portraying the gifted as a national resource, is described in Chapter 4. In this chapter, we examine how the failure to nurture gifted children was displayed as equivalent to squandering and stifling America’s future leadership. Through longitudinal studies of gifted children’s accomplishments and retrospective analyses of the eminent, gifted child scholars continuously emphasized gifted children’s productive capacities. We shall see that the cautionary message underlying these reports has always been that gifted children’s productive capacities can easily be wasted if not properly nurtured.

Chapter 5 examines classroom practices associated with gifted education. In this chapter, I argue that gifted education is the flip side of the “pedagogy of the oppressed”; that it is a strategy to single out the children of the affluent for training in leadership and dominance. Contrary to the stereotypes usually associated with gifted education, this pedagogy is not characterized by academic rigor, but is organized around the personal and social traits associated with the gifted themselves.

Despite all appearances to the contrary, this social movement does not