

*Center for Gifted Education
College of William and Mary*

Gender and Genius

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Our ideas about what is gifted behavior for a boy or for a girl are imbued with society's notions of appropriate gender identity. Gifted boys and girls need to learn to cope with their giftedness while carefully following prescribed gender roles if they want to avoid the rejection of their communities. How were these gender roles shaped, and how did we get our ideas about what gifted girls and gifted boys should be like? This is the story of how these ideas came to be, how they shape the lives of our bright children¹ and what we can do to help gifted boys and girls break free of the stereotypes and live their own dreams.

Sigmund Freud's (1933) theory of gender identity development is still one of the most influential theories, despite its lack of empirical support. Theories which survive as robustly as this one in the absence of data to support them almost always reflect deeply held societal beliefs. Freud first outlined the development of boys' gender identities in terms of the Oedipal struggle. The little boy, feeling inferior to his father, falls in love with his mother and dreams of marrying her and destroying his father. His greatest fear is that his father will destroy his masculinity. He resolves his Oedipal complex by identifying with his father, breaking with his mother, and gaining a mature gender identity which is inevitably described by Freud and his followers as a male who has accepted all things strong and aggressive and rejected all things pliant and receptive, like the love of literature and the quiet life of the scholar.

Freud also gave us the idea that girls and women are incomplete men. The little girl, he said, is a "little man." Girls learn at an early age that compared to boys, they are not as complete, and want to be like boys: this was the famous "penis envy." They develop an Electra complex: in which they fall in love with their fathers in order to be associated with his power. Therefore, they remain attached to their mother, and develop the feminine characteristics of passivity, obsession with beauty, and timidity which will make them attractive to men.

Despite the hostility with which the psychoanalytic establishment greeted disagreement, Karen Horney (1939) disputed this model of gender identity development. Unlike Freud, she did not believe that gender identity was biologically determined, and she resisted forcefully the idea of penis envy. Not only did girls not feel a deficit of a penis, she said, boys may actually feel a womb envy! Male overachievement, she claimed, might be an overcompensation for the inability to reproduce. Nevertheless, Freud's view continued to hold sway, and found its way into popular culture in depictions of castrating women achievers who are miserable until they find the love of a male and settle down.

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I would not go into such detail here about a theory which has received little support and which has been thoroughly disproven if it had not had such profound influence on the ways in which we teach and guide gifted boys and girls. For with Freud's insistence on the repudiation of the feminine as the norm for masculine maturity, and his relegation of female achievers to the ranks of penis envious, he helped to create the train wreck that so often occurs in our culture when boys try to cope with being intelligent and masculine, and girls try to cope with being intelligent and feminine.

Lewis Terman (Terman and Oden, 1935) began his work with gifted children as a way of validating difficult items for the Stanford Binet intelligence test. The original Binet Simon test differentiated between normal and subnormal children; the expectation was that the new instrument would also differentiate the normal from the gifted. Terman chose for his subjects California school children who were high achievers with strong academic potential. These were second and third generation children of the Gold Rush, middle class daughters and sons of a sunny prosperous state. The process of teacher selection insured that these young people would be mostly white, mostly personable, and well in keeping with preferred gender behaviors. Terman, after much testing with his newly developed instrument for measuring intelligence, had come to perceive most of his high scoring students as healthy) well-adjusted, and achieving. This experience may not have been his only motivation for promoting this observation. I would like to suggest that he was also trying to re-masculinize the construct of genius in the face of the commonly held belief that gifted boys were effeminate, sickly, and weak. A reading of his first studies of gifted boys will show an obsession with the boys' manliness: he reported with pride their chest widths, their development of secondary sexual characteristics, and their greater height than average boys. He developed a "masculinity index" to measure their play activities.

Therefore, a new stereotype of the gifted boy was born, of the well adjusted, athletic, popular guy. Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1926), who, in New York City, was working with an even brighter cohort of gifted students was not able to confirm this image. She found a number of highly gifted boys who were not well adjusted and who suffered from feelings of difference and rejection. Her concerns went virtually unheard, and her books went out of print until the last decade. The stereotype of the vigorous gifted boy was so powerful that well into the 1980's it was difficult for psychotherapists who were dealing with gifted males' underachievement and self-destructiveness to receive credibility for their concerns.

What has always been extraordinary to me about the work of Lewis Terman was that from the very beginning, girls were included in the study. At that time, much of the study of intelligence was the study of eminent men. No author, even women authors such as Catherine Cox, would make even trifling attempts to identify accomplished women for decades to come. Nevertheless, Terman made efforts to correct item bias in the Stanford Binet so that as many

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girls as boys would be identified, and he went so far as to obscure the drop in girls' IQ scores between 11 and 17 by collapsing their means scores with the boys, yielding a nonsignificant decline in IQ for the entire group. Was this because Terman's own experience as the academic advisor to a generation of brilliant female psychologists convinced him of female intellectual equality? Was it because of his co-author Melita Oden's convictions? Was it simply because American girls were already constructing a new world in which female intelligence must be reckoned with? We may never know.

It is all the more puzzling because while the construct of genius which emerged from Terman's work restricted the gender appropriate behaviors of gifted males, it actually expanded a little $\frac{3}{4}$ the possibilities for gifted females. Terman and Oden made it clear that gifted girls were much more like gifted boys in their interests, play behaviors, and plans than they were like gifted girls. They stressed, however, that the girls still had "feminine" interests such as doll play and reading girls' magazines. In short, they were taking pains to create a new androgynous model for female giftedness, in a society permeated by the belief that giftedness was incompatible with femininity.

According to psychoanalytic theory, these gifted girls were suffering from penis envy and had unresolved Electra complexes. According to the societal preferred gender roles, these girls were in danger of sacrificing their futures as wives and mothers.

Therefore, the modest attempt by Terman and Oden to suggest that gifted girls might be intellectually achieving AND feminine had little power in a society in which combination became untenable after puberty. Tomboys, or "little men" have always been more acceptable to American society than feminine boys; however, puberty marks the point at which girls are forcefully taught the dangers of failing to be feminine. It was clear, from Terman and Oden's later research findings, that most of the gifted women had yielded to preferred gender roles. By midlife, half of the women subjects were homemakers, and most of the rest were in traditional women's occupations, with elementary and secondary teaching being the leading careers. The authors said, in describing the occupational attainments of men, "The study has been limited to men because of the lack of a yardstick by which to estimate the success of women. By means of rating techniques, it is possible to identify fairly accurately outstanding chemists, astronomers, mathematicians or psychologists, but no one has yet devised a method for identifying the best housewives and mothers, and this is what the vast majority of women aspire to be. The few women who go out for a professional career do so with one eye on the preferred alternative. Those who make no pretense of wanting a career are willing to accept any reasonably pleasant and respectable employment that will bridge the gap between school and marriage. For some the gap will never be bridged, and the result is that there are highly gifted women working as

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secretaries, filing clerks, elementary teachers, and telephone operators. (Terman and Oden, 1935, p.150).

The news recently is full of the glad tidings that girls have caught up with boys in math and science achievement and that the gender gap has been closed (Phillips, 1998.) Women are filling the ranks of the professions and entering high status, high salary jobs. Girls are more aggressive, boys are more passive. Talk show authors bemoan the idea that attention to concerns of girls and women has impeded the education and guidance of boys. Sex role stereotypes are dead, they say, and now we must attend to the business of educating in a gender free society. As is true with the reports of the ends of any social trends that make people uncomfortable, these reports of the death of the gender gap are greatly exaggerated. The gender gap is alive and well in gifted education, in research about giftedness, and in the lives of gifted girls and boys. Prescribed gender role behaviors that dominated in the first part of this century continue to hold the power to bias education and research, and to restrict the psychological and life choices of gifted girls and boys, men and women.

In order to see how prescribed gender roles, and unfounded assumptions continue to limit the choices of gifted girls and boys, it is useful to examine common practices of guidance and education at the various developmental stages. I call these milestones and danger zones.

Both gifted girls and gifted boys may be denied opportunities to develop early reading abilities, but for different, gender based reasons. A common finding in the literature is that girls are more likely than boys to be precocious readers (Kerr, 1997.) Girls in general read up to a year earlier than boys. It is also a common finding that precocious readers do not necessarily go on to become academically talented learners. However, it can also be readily observed that the majority of American schools do not have any special provisions for precocious readers. Most schools begin reading instruction at the time when boys are ready; girls, particularly gifted girls may have already passed the point of maximum interest and readiness. Because it is assumed that the girls can wait for the boys to be ready, we may miss the opportunity to transform reading precocity into academic talent in girls.

Equally destructive to boys is the practice of kindergarten red-shirting. This is the choice made by parents to delay boys' entry into kindergarten as long as possible so that they will be bigger and more successful in sports. The practice appears to be growing throughout the US, particularly in districts where a wide range of entry ages is allowed. It is probably particularly harmful to gifted boys, who are likely to become bored behemoths if left till seven years old to learn the things they were so eager to learn at five. The idea that a gifted boy needs to be big and athletic no matter what the cost to his educational development is a good example of the fear of the effeminate intellectual.

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Gifted boys learn very early that if they are smart, they had better be smart and athletic; athletic ability makes intelligence acceptable. The nonathletic gifted boy is doomed to social rejection, and is labeled a nerd -- unless he discovers a special talent for underachievement. Whereas underachievement in college and adulthood is the specialty of gifted women, from late primary throughout the high school years, it is the special province of gifted boys, who do underachievement exceptionally well. Underachievement was the most common presenting problem of gifted boys of eleven years and older brought to the Guidance Laboratory for Gifted and Talented at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Nick Colangelo and Kerr (1993) found in our study of extreme underachievers that they were 90% boys, mostly white, from large high schools in affluent suburbs. The proportion of young men to young women in our special Counseling Laboratory program for underachievers was six to one. Although there are many causes for underachievement -- see the diagnostic decision tree in my Handbook for Counseling Gifted and Talented - there is ample evidence that one of them is male social coping with gender identity expectations. In contexts in which achievement is associated with nerdhood and weakness, underachievement becomes a way of asserting independence, strength, and masculinity. The disassociation of the gifted boy from traditional achievement allows him to maintain his gender identity at the expense of his future goals. In the early years of underachievement, gifted males often have what I call the "Bartleby Syndrome", after the clerk in Melville's short story who pleasantly and quietly repeated the phrase "I prefer not to" to all requests, including at the end, even suggestions related to his own survival. Bartleby began by saying I prefer not to requests that he count money or copy figures; he ended by preferring not to eat or to seek shelter. The exasperation of parents and teachers is immense precisely because of the gentleness and passivity of the refusal; I believe that the boys themselves cannot tell us why they must blindly obey the imperative to avoid compliance and identification with intellectual achievement at all cost.

Yet, the desire for learning and knowledge does not go away as the gifted male underachiever ages-- it simply goes underground. Nick Colangelo and I studied students who had scored in the 95th percentile on the ACT and yet were achieving below a C in high school. These were truly closeted intellectuals. However, the outward appearance of older gifted male underachievers is often that of a sociopath -- the rebel without a cause. In fact, in a dissertation by Cathann Arceneaux (1991) at the University of Iowa, she discovered that the personality characteristics of gifted male underachievers were very similar to those of sociopaths: high impulsivity, high defiance, low harm avoidance. What distinguished them from this group was a high need for understanding or intellectuality: the classic Holden Caulfield profile of the tough talking underachiever with a hunger for meaning.

Even gifted boys who continue to be achieving in school seem to become more passive with time, and currently are less involved in leadership activities than previous generations.

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Curiously, as girls begin to take the lead in high school organizations, boys take flight. Over 80% of high school leadership positions are now held by girls (Fiscus, 1997.) It may be that, just as status and salary of an occupation go down as women enter in large numbers, so the status of high school activities go down as girls take over.

For girls, the pattern is different. In my book, *Smart Girls*, I compared gifted girls to flowers that grow in the spring. Gifted girls' urge for achievement is not only not quelled, it is encouraged. Since the advent of the women's movement, efforts to create programs to encourage gifted girls to greater aspirations and achievement have proliferated. The programs have been so successful that gifted girls now have aspirations very similar to gifted boys throughout high school, and even spend more time and effort planning their careers than boys (Gassin, Kelly & Feldhusen). However, to my mind, the grace period in which girls are allowed to aspire to leadership and to achieve identity through their accomplishments has simply been extended upwards to the college years. Because according to the research of Holland and Eisenhart (1991) as well as research on high school valedictorians by Arnold (1994), a culture of romance which is virulently inimical to female achievement still thrives in coeducational colleges and universities. By the time a gifted young woman has graduated from college, she is likely to have lowered her estimate of her own intelligence, to have changed majors to a less challenging major, and to have lowered her career aspirations. She is much more likely than her gifted male peers to have abandoned her math and science interests, no matter how strong they once were, and is less likely to pursue graduate training in these fields. After college, she is more likely to follow her boyfriend or husband to his job than to have him follow her. She is the one most likely to have major child rearing responsibilities. And although it is now the norm, gifted women often combine work and family, gifted women continue to be more likely to give up full time work for part-time, and to give up leadership positions than are gifted men (Kerr, 1997.)

Although the gifted male in college has not given up his math and science interests, he is in danger of giving up something much more important: his opportunity to choose a career based on his most deeply held values. Most gifted men, no matter how strong their interests in creative arts, languages, humanities or literature, have given up these interests because they do not seem lucrative - or perhaps manly- enough. (Colangelo and Kerr, 1991.) The majority of gifted men choose college majors from among the same four areas: engineering, pre-med, pre--law, and business. The unimaginative majors of gifted men often lead to dissatisfaction in adulthood, but little hope of changing careers because of the enormous investment of time and money that goes into higher status occupations. Gifted men may end up overworked and unavailable to family as they pursue what they have been trained to pursue: status, power, and riches.

By the time gifted males and females have reached adulthood, the development of their talent has been profoundly shaped by their gender. For different reasons, they have often

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compromised away the promise of their giftedness. Except for those boys and girls who have the courage and support to challenge gender roles, most gifted boys and girls do succumb to society's image of what achievement constitutes.

A telling example comes from our recent study of gifted students' perfect future day fantasies: their favorite vision of what they might be doing in ten years. For twenty years I have been sitting behind the one-way mirror observing groups of students as they discuss their dreams and goals with their counselors and each other. My favorite technique for assessing students' expectations about their own future is a visualization exercise called "The Perfect Future Day Fantasy." In this fantasy, students imagine a day from morning to midnight ten years in their own future. They are asked to imagine where they are living, what they're wearing, with whom they are living, and what kind of work they are doing. A typical college male's fantasy goes something like this: "I wake up and get in my car -- a really nice rebuilt '67 Mustang-- and then I go to work, I think I'm some kind of a manager of a computer firm, and then I go home and when I get there, my wife is there at the door (she has a really nice figure) she has a drink for me, and she's made a great meal. We watch TV or maybe play with the kids." Here is the typical college female's fantasy: "I wake up and my husband and I get in our twin Jettas and I go to the law firm where I work, then after work, I go home and he's pulling up in the driveway at the same time. We go in and have a glass of wine and we make an omelet together and eat by candlelight. Then the nanny brings the children in and we play with them till bedtime." What's wrong with this picture?

Women dream of dual career bliss, while men still seem to nourish the hope that they might find a woman who wants to stay home and take care of them and the children. Despite extraordinary changes in the career expectations of women, many college men have yet to acknowledge the changes in gender roles that women's expectations imply. In an interesting case of whether the glass is 70% full or 30% empty, Astin shows how the per cent of men who endorse the item, "The activities of married women are best confined to the home and family," has dropped from 66.5% to 30.8%." The per cent of women who endorsed this item changed from 44.3% in 1966 to 19% in 1996. Astin seems to praise this as progress; however, the fact remains that three out of every ten men that a college woman may meet may expect that after marriage she will "confine" herself to caring for him and his children. It is likely that even more men who publicly endorse equity in relationships secretly wish for a more traditional lifestyle. On the other hand, college women have as their goals romantic yet egalitarian relationships for which they have no roadmaps.

Therefore, in both work and relationships, gifted men and women may sabotage their own dreams by trying to fit too well into the gender roles that have been prescribed for them.

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As educators, we can prevent these compromised dreams by helping both girls and boys to discover their own meaning of femininity and masculinity, and by helping both girls and boys to make their choices based on their most deeply held values. A workshop called Values based Career Counseling helps both adolescents and college age students to make decisions in this way (Kerr & Erb, 1991.) However, teachers and parents can begin much earlier to help their children to discover the work values that will give meaning to their lives. In addition, both girls and boys can be helped to be achieving in order to accomplish their own goals, rather than to accomplish the goals of others. Girls need to continue to be encouraged to lead, but boys also need to be taught that there is no shame in following a girl leader. Both gifted girls and boys need relationship education even more than they need sex education, for bright women and men will need to learn to love and work together in the future. Girls and boys can be taught to respect one another's goals through the modeling of their teachers and parents.

The findings of the Happy Family Study (Kerr, Gottfried, Chopp, and Cohn, in press) may have relevance to understanding what families can do to promote children's freedom to create their own identity and develop their unique gifts. This study interviewed thirty bright students who tested in the ninetieth percentile and above in their perceptions of their family's functioning. These bright, 19 year old men and women were creative, goal-oriented, congenial and contented people. They seemed satisfied with their gender identity and sexual orientation, and comfortable with who they were. The families had a few important things in common. Both the mother and the father spent a great deal of time at home; sixty per cent of mothers and thirty five per cent of fathers were at home. However, they worked out of the home in creative or individualistic careers. The mothers and fathers modeled egalitarian relationships, and supported one another's goals. They provided both safety and privacy in their households; everyone did their own thing, and felt admired for their talents and appreciated by the others. These families were from diverse cultures, religions, and socioeconomic groups; but they had all created lives in which men and women were valued equally, and gifts were nurtured gently and generously.

Carol Tavris (1992), the noted psychologist and researcher on gender says we need to focus on what it would take to have a society based on the qualities we value in both sexes. To do this, we must help our brightest children to discover their own finest qualities, and nurture them in each other.

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