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Emerging Conceptions of Giftedness: Building a Bridge to the New Century

Joseph S. Renzulli*

*Department of Educational Psychology
University of Connecticut*

This article describes a continuum of definitions of giftedness from conservative to liberal, and how these definitions relate to the development of the 3-ring conception of giftedness. In this definition, above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity are seen as 3 interactive clusters of traits that gifted students may exhibit or are capable of developing. The 3-ring conception of giftedness provides an operational definition that can be used by schools as the basis for identification that, in turn, leads to more targeted programming options for gifted students. Recent research related to the 3-ring conception focuses on the infinite number of interactions that contribute to giftedness including personality and environmental factors that have an impact on one's ability to engage in creative and productive endeavors.

Most people who will attain success in their lives, however defined, are people who figure out who they are—what they have to offer themselves, others, and the world at large. They find ways of making the most of their diverse talents, and they find ways to lie with their weaknesses.

—Robert Sternberg (1997a, p. 9)

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, it provides an overview of past and present definitions of giftedness. Second, it describes an operational definition that can be used by schools as they develop identification and programming options for gifted students. Third, I propose ideas for future directions in the field of giftedness.

The Continuum of Definitions of Giftedness

Numerous conceptions of giftedness and countless definitions have been put forth over the years. One way to organize these definitions is to look at them in terms of where they fall on a continuum from conservative to liberal. In other words, what is the restrictiveness of the definition. For example, a conservative view would be Terman's (1926) definition of *giftedness*, "the top 1% level in general intellectual ability, as measured by the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale or comparable instrument" (p. 43). This definition would allow only for the inclusion of students who are academically able and exclude students whose strengths are in areas such as creativity, the arts, psychomotor skills, or leadership potential. A restrictive definition such as this provides a clear cutoff level and tidy identification practices, but many scholars and practitioners argue that it overlooks numerous students whose potential for superior performance

* Requests for reprints should be sent to Joseph S. Renzulli, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Connecticut, 2131 Hillside Road, Unit 3007, Storrs, CT 06269–3007. E-mail: joseph.renzulli@uconn.edu

simply does not show up on intelligence tests. Because many minority persons and persons with various learning disabilities typically do not score well on cognitive ability tests, restrictive definitions clearly discriminate against these groups when it comes to gaining access to gifted program services.

Psychometricians and psychologists continue to equate giftedness with a high IQ following Terman's lead in 1916. Since that early time, however, other researchers such as Guilford (1967) and Thurstone (1947) argued that intellect cannot be expressed in such a unitary manner, and suggested more multifaceted approaches to intelligence (Wallace & Pierce, 1992). Research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s has provided data that support notions of multiple components to intelligence. This is illustrated in Sternberg and Davidson's landmark book entitled *Conceptions of Giftedness* (1986) in which 16 different views of the nature of giftedness are presented. Each of these conceptions represents a perspective on the continuum from conservative to liberal; however, the majority of contributors to this volume clearly favor a more liberal or flexible view of giftedness.

Liberal definitions expand the conception of giftedness because they consider a broader range of performance areas than those measured by cognitive ability tests. The more open nature of liberal definitions not only expands the concept, but it also allows for more flexibility in the interpretation of both test and nontest performance. The Witty (1958) definition illustrated how a liberal definition leaves room for subjective interpretation:

There are children whose outstanding potentialities in art, in writing, or in social leadership can be recognized largely by their performance. Hence, we have recommended that the definition of giftedness be expanded and that we consider any child gifted whose performance, in a potentially valuable line of human activity, is consistently remarkable. (p. 62)

Multifaceted approaches such as those of Sternberg (1997b), Gardner (1983), and Renzulli (1978) are more consistent with present day theory and research. Sternberg (1984) first introduced his triarchic theory of intelligence in 1984 with the categories of analytical, creative, and practical intelligence. He later defined these dimensions as components of successful intelligence (Sternberg, 1997b) acknowledging that people's strengths and weaknesses are as diverse as they are. Sternberg (1997b) explained that successful intelligence is the ability for each person to find what he or she does more and less well and to figure out how to make the most of strengths while compensating for weaknesses. Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences and Renzulli's (1978) three-ring conception of gifted behavior serve as precise examples of multifaceted and well-researched conceptualizations of intelligence and giftedness. Gardner's (1993) definition of an *intelligence* is "the ability to solve problems, or create products, that are valued within one or more cultural settings" (p. x). Within his multiple intelligences theory, he describes at least seven specific intelligences: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Recently, Gardner (1999) added the naturalist and spiritual intelligences. He believes that people are much more comfortable using the term *talents* and that intelligence is generally reserved to describe linguistic or logical "smartness;" however, he does not believe that certain abilities should arbitrarily qualify as intelligence over others (e.g., language as an intelligence vs. dance as a talent; Gardner, 1993).

Renzulli (1978) defined gifted behaviors rather than gifted individuals, and gifted behavior is composed of three components:

Gifted behavior consists of behaviors that reflect an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits—above-average ability, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity. Individuals capable of developing gifted behavior are those possessing or capable of developing this composite set of traits and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance. Persons who manifest or are capable of developing an interaction among the three clusters require a wide variety of educational opportunities and services that are not ordinarily provided through regular instructional programs. (Renzulli & Reis, 1997, p. 8)

Characteristics that may be manifested in Renzulli's three clusters are presented in Table 1.

This definition has grown in popularity since its inception. It is considered by many people in the field to be the major research-based rationale for a more liberal point of view; however, this redirection in present day changes about the view of giftedness has not been widely circulated among special educators and persons in general education. This special issue of *Exceptionality* provides an ideal opportunity to share with educators of exceptional children the major direction in which gifted education is moving and how the work discussed in this article has influenced that direction.

The U.S. federal government also subscribed to a multifaceted approach to giftedness as early as 1972 when the *Marland Report* (1972) definition was passed (Public Law 91–230, § 806). The *Marland*, or U.S. Department of Education definition, has dominated most states' definitions of giftedness and talent (Passow & Rudnitski, 1993). The most recent federal definition was cited in the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988, and is discussed in the most recent national report on the state of gifted and talented education:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor. (U.S. Department of Education, 1993, p. 26)

Although many school districts adopt this or other broad definitions as their philosophy, others still only pay attention to intellectual ability when both identifying and serving students. Even though we have more diverse definitions of giftedness and intelligence today, many students with gifts and talents go unrecognized and underserved perhaps due to the differing characteristics found in intellectually gifted, creatively gifted, and diversely gifted learners (Hishinuma & Tadaki, 1996; Kloosterman, 1997).

Table 1

Taxonomy of Behavioral Manifestations of Giftedness According to Renzulli's Three-Ring Definition of Gifted Behaviors

Above average ability

General

- High levels of abstract thought
- Adaptation to novel situations
- Rapid and accurate retrieval of information

Above average ability

Specific

- Applications of general abilities to specific area of knowledge
- Capacity to sort out relevant from irrelevant information
- Capacity to acquire and use advanced knowledge and strategies while pursuing a problem

Task commitment

- Capacity for high levels of interest–enthusiasm
- Hard work and determination in a particular area
- Self-confidence and drive to achieve
- Ability to identify significant problems within an area of study
- Setting high standards for one's work

Creativity

- Fluency, flexibility, and originality of thought
 - Open to new experiences and ideas
 - Curious
 - Willing to take risks
 - Sensitive to aesthetic characteristics
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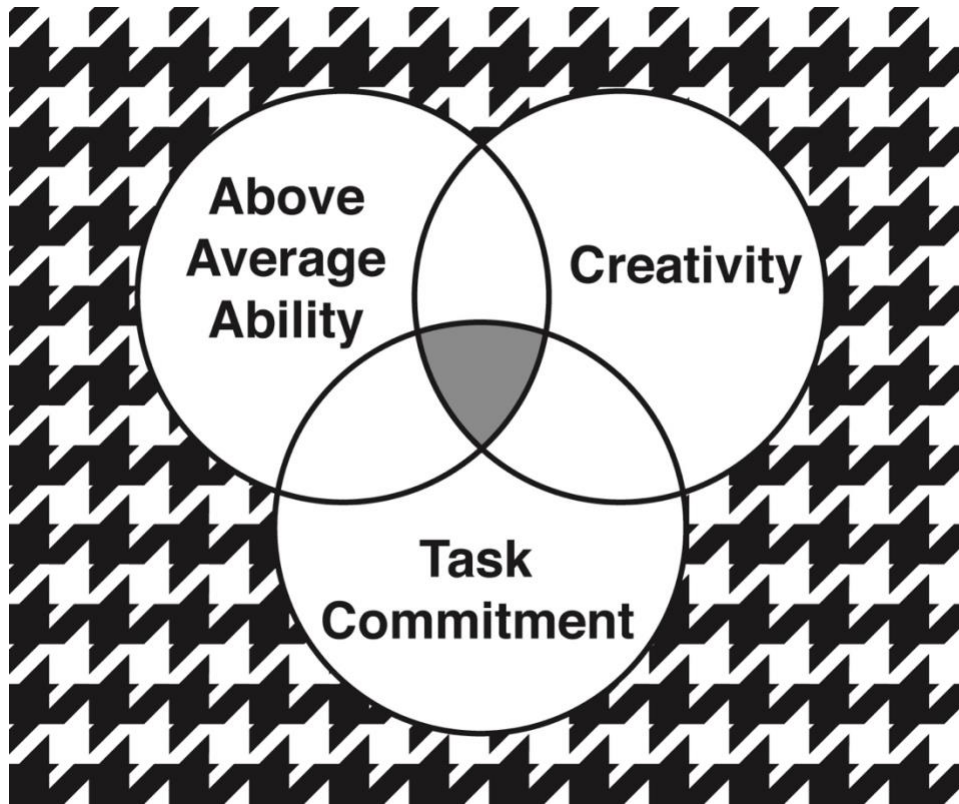
Note. Adapted from *Schoolwide Enrichment Model: A How-To Guide for Educational Excellence* (p. 9), by J. S. Renzulli and S. M. Reis, 1997, Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning. Copyright © 1997 by Creative Learning Press. Adapted with permission.

The Three-Ring Conception

Research on creative and productive people has consistently shown that although no single criterion should be used to identify giftedness, persons who have achieved recognition for their unique accomplishments and creative contributions possess three groups of traits. These traits are above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity (see Figure 1). These clusters of traits work together, and although the clusters may vary in size within the context of a given performance situation, no one particular cluster is of greater importance than the others. It is also important to point out that, whereas general ability tends to remain constant over time, specific abilities, task commitment, and creativity are functions of contextual situations. We develop our task commitment and creativity as a result of being involved in challenging situations in which we have an existing or emerging interest. The developmental nature of task commitment and creativity means that we should not use these traits as prerequisites for gaining entrance to special services. Rather, we should give larger groups of young people opportunities to explore new and interesting material, and determine degrees of follow-up services based on the emergence of creative ideas and task commitment.

Figure 1

Three-ring Conception of Giftedness (The houndstooth background represents the interaction between personality and environment that gives rise to the three rings.)



Above-Average Ability

Above-average ability can be defined in two ways: general ability and specific ability. General ability refers to the capacity to process information, integrate experiences that result in appropriate and adaptive responses in new situations, and engagement in abstract thinking. Verbal and numerical reasoning, spatial relations, memory, and word fluency are examples of general ability. Specific ability is the capacity to acquire knowledge, skill, or competence to perform in a specialized area. For example, the skills of an archaeologist or mathematician would be considered specific ability skills.

For the purpose of this model, above-average ability will be used to describe the upper ranges of performance or potential in either or both general or specific ability. In general, we consider this to be the top 15% to 20% of performance in any given area or human endeavor. It is important to point out that in the cases of both general and especially specific abilities, I am not referring to those manifestations of ability that are only measured by tests. As we move up the scale of complexity in manifestations of human performance and potential, it becomes much more difficult to reduce complex abilities to precise numerical documentation. If there is ever any hope of expanding the conception of giftedness beyond that which can be measured precisely by tests, then we must also be willing to accept, and even revere, forms of identification information that are derived from nontest sources. It is equally important to point

out that when considering opportunities for special services in schools, we must pay as much attention to estimates of potential for superior performance as well as actual demonstrated performance. Many young people who have not had appropriate educational opportunities may not perform at superior levels through no fault of their own. Therefore, a good gifted program should be responsible for providing underidentified students with challenging and stimulating opportunities, resources, and experiences that will serve as vehicles for transforming potential into performance.

Task Commitment

The second cluster of traits that is consistently found in creative and productive persons constitutes a refined or focused form of motivation that I have called *task commitment*. Whereas motivation is usually defined in terms of a general energized process that triggers responses in organisms, task commitment represents energy brought to bear on a particular problem (task) or specific performance area. The terms that are associated with task commitment are *perseverance*, *endurance*, *hard work*, *practice*, and *the confidence in one's ability to engage in important work*. Once again, these manifestations of task commitment are the result of opportunities, resources, and encouragement that are provided within the context of stimulating and interest-related learning situations.

Creativity

The third cluster of traits that characterizes gifted persons consists of factors that have in the past been lumped together as creativity. It is not uncommon to see the words *gifted*, *genius*, and *highly creative persons* used interchangeably and synonymously. In this model the term *creative* refers to someone who is recognized for his or her creative accomplishments or persons who have a facility for generating many interesting and feasible ideas. It is important to consider that the inclusion of creativity creates a problem because of the relationship of creativity measurements and creative accomplishments. Given that creativity tests may not measure all dimensions of creativity, it is necessary to focus attention on alternative methods to assess this complex manifestation of human behavior. It is important to mention for a third time that the spark plug, which may ignite creativity, is a result of the types of experiences we provide to young people.

Discussion

There are some basic generalizations that need to be addressed. The first of these is that giftedness consists of an interaction among three clusters of traits—above-average but not necessarily superior abilities, task commitment, and creativity.

A second generalization is that this definition needs to be viewed in relationship to specific performance areas such as mathematics, city planning, cartooning, or film criticism. The third generalization relates to how we measure superior performance in specific areas.

A Definition of Giftedness

Although no single statement can effectively integrate the many ramifications of the research described, the following definition of giftedness attempts to summarize the major conclusions and generalizations resulting from our research.

Gifted behavior consists of behaviors that reflect an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits—above-average ability, high levels of task commitments, and high levels of creativity. Individuals capable of developing this composite set of gifted behaviors are those possessing or capable of developing this composite set of traits and applying them to any potential valuable area of human performance. Persons who manifest or are capable of developing an interaction among the three clusters require a wide variety of educational opportunities and services that are not ordinarily provided through regular instructional programs. (Renzulli & Reis, 1997, p. 8)

Necessary Next Steps: A New Look at Giftedness for the New Century

In the original work on the three-ring conception of giftedness, I embedded the three rings in a houndstooth background. The interactive, two-toned background represented personality and environmental influences that contributed to the manifestation of the three rings. We are dealing with an almost infinite number of interactions in the making of giftedness. We certainly need more research that deals with the traits that contribute to both schoolhouse and creative-productive giftedness, the interaction between the two, and perhaps even more important, that elusive and inexplicable thing that is left over in human productivity after everything else has been explained. We also need to explore new research paradigms that focus on the intensive study of young people at work in demanding learning situations that place a premium on creative productivity. I have written about the dimensions that such research might take elsewhere (Renzulli, 1992). Suffice it to say at this time, I believe the intensive study of young people at work holds the highest promise for adding major new dimensions to our entire understanding of this complex and elusive thing called giftedness.

My colleagues and I are now embarking on a series of studies that will investigate more intensively those factors that appear in the houndstooth diagram underlying the three-ring conception of giftedness. This work, entitled Operation Houndstooth, will focus on expanding the conception of giftedness to include factors that promote social capital and a greater concern for the well-being of people and the Earth's resources. What causes some people to mobilize their interpersonal, political, ethical, and moral realms of being in such ways that they place human concerns and the common good above materialism, ego enhancement, and self-indulgence? How can we understand the science of human strength that brings about the remarkable contributions of people like Nelson Mandela, Rachel Carson, Mother Teresa, and others who have focused their talents on bringing about changes that are directed toward making the lives of all people better? Although our new work will deal with some admittedly messy variables, we believe it is important in the new century to find out, in a scientific way, more about factors such as vision, hope, optimism, sense of power to change things, moral courage, physical and mental energy, and passion for the improvement of adverse conditions. This work is consistent with the rapidly emerging positive psychology movement. I believe that people who have focused their time and energy on human concerns may be the greatest gift givers of all. Our

new research will attempt to shed some light on these positive human concerns and how we can promote them in young people. Interested persons can keep in touch with this work as it develops at the Operation Houndstooth section of our Web site: <https://gifted.uconn.edu>. Stay tuned!

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