

The Gifted Label and Biases toward Giftedness through the Lens of the Structured Functionalist

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Introduction

Giftedness has many different definitions, but through a strong consensus giftedness can be described as, "... advanced development across intellectual areas, advanced development within a specific academic or arts-related area or unusual organizational power for bringing about desired results" (VanTassel-Baska, 2002, p. 84).

Developing individual talents is a high priority in every education system across the globe. One of the noble goals of the American education system is it is closely connected to the main tenets of the field of gifted education. It seeks to provide best possible education to its high ability students so the country can reassert its prominence in the intellectual, artistic, and moral leadership of the world (Renzulli & Reis, 1991). However, the field is facing a quiet crisis that in many ways is related to the lack of consensus on basic topics such as definition, identification, and curriculum (Coleman, Sanders, & Cross, 1997). One reason is that scholars in the field use various lenses to judge practices and issues. They hold different philosophical assumptions about the reality and nature of constructs they start to research. Although there is a perennial debate about major topics that seems to be irreconcilable in the near future, leading figures in the field believe that the differences among positions may develop a clearer understanding of the phenomenon of giftedness (Coleman, et al., 1997).

Guba (1990) uses a scheme of epistemology (the role of the knower), ontology (the nature of knowledge), and methodology (how to study a phenomenon) to distinguish among the paradigms. One of the widely used lenses to view the phenomena of giftedness and talent development is the empirical-analytic mode. This mode of inquiry

views the universe as comprised of universal natural laws that scientists discover (Popkewitz, 1984). Therefore, researchers using the empirical-analytic mode see giftedness as quantifiable psychosocial phenomena (Coleman, et al., 1997, Sanders & Cross, 1997). This view brings many challenges because gifted students tend to be evaluated as definable and measurable. Standardized tests that have cultural biases are used universally in any setting to identify gifted students. These students are labeled and believed to have needs that can be responded to through specifiable programs. In this predominantly used paradigm, the phenomena of giftedness is believed to exist free of cultural forces.

In contrast to this paradigm, structural functionalism describes the phenomenon where different parts of society function in ways that build upon each other, thus creating a cycle of interconnected effects. This paper uses the lens of functionalism to emphasize two of the challenges that gifted students face in school and outside. The two challenges are stigma of giftedness as a result of the label and educator biases toward gifted students.

Through the Structured Functionalist Lens

Functionalism is the system of thinking based on the ideas of Emile Durkheim, a well-known social psychologist and philosopher. Functionalism examines the ways through which society is heading toward the equilibrium and the contribution of social patterns to this stability. Durkheim's main question was how the society remains stable and what holds it together. Durkheim examined evolution in the society and argued that social bonds in pre-industrial societies were formed through common sentiments and shared common values, whereas in modern societies, these bonds are based

on specialization and interdependence and are stronger among members (Macionis, 2010). This interdependence helps to ensure that the parts of society work together in harmony for the betterment of the whole and will force others to adapt in order to maintain a stable state society.

According to functionalism, all social activities have the function of maintaining a social system. The functionalist approach focuses on social structures through a macro sociological analysis and examines how those structures shape society as a whole (Macionis, 2010). Although functionalism started looking at the society from a large scale perspective, there are some sociologists who examine smaller units by using the functionalist lens.

There are two groups of followers of functionalism: macro functionalists who study larger social units; and micro functionalists who are concerned with small groups (Martindale, 1960). Macro functionalism is best known through the work of Talcott Parsons and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. Micro functionalism, on the other hand, has its theoretical origins in Gestalt psychology, and is best known through the pioneer works of Kurt Lewin. Although Lewin's (1936) earlier works were on social psychology, he later focused on smaller units. Lewin suggested that personality cannot be explained purely through psychology: The sociocultural milieu had to be taken into account (Whitaker, 1965). Both of these divisions are worthwhile as they can be applied to explore answers to different research questions in a number of fields such as anthropology, political science, education, economy, and sociology.

When we think about a factory assembly line we picture moving parts working together to produce a complete product. This product was conceived from an organizational staff comprised of marketing managers, architects, manufacturer engineers, and customer service staff. All of these individuals are parts of a system. This group has developed common beliefs regarding the organization of product development. Much like the staff (people working towards one goal based on

a common idea or product), we now picture pieces being assembled one piece at a time, with the next piece ready to build upon the previous. Even though each piece throughout the assembly process is completely different, each piece is specific to its function, and each piece works in a seamless manner with the final product being a combination of all pieces.

Parson's Structural-Functional Model Of Society – Institutional Interaction

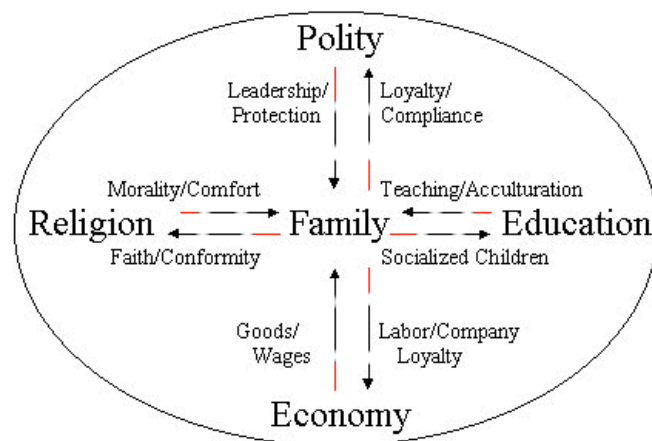


Figure 1. Talcott Parsons' Structural-Functional Model of Society: Institutional Interaction.

Retrieved from: <http://www.uakron.edu/>

Functionalism interprets each part of society in terms of how it contributes to the stability of the whole society. Society is more than the sum of its parts; rather, each part of society is functional for the stability of the whole society (Crossman, 2014). Functionalism thrives on variables doing its part within a system, thus ensuring there is no breakdown in stages of the process. Therefore, functionalists tend to think in terms of the perfect scenario. Functionalists contend that society works together harmoniously when all members agree upon the rules and norms of what is conceived as best for the group as a whole. Often times, the functionalist contradicts those ideals associated with the other two main sociological perspectives: symbolic interactionism and conflict theory. Where symbolic interactionism focuses on how we act

based on the interpretations of how a system works, and conflict theory focuses on problems and conflicts associated throughout the process of the system, the functionalist tends to focus on the anticipated end result and achieving it by doing that which was originally agreed upon from beginning to end.

Critics of the functionalist theory feel that this theory lacks the realism associated with society today. As family values have changed and societies struggle with the ability to cope with economic fluctuations, the functional approach loses credibility when events such as divorce, theft, and disorderly conduct conflict with those norms that were originally agreed upon. In addition, critics claim that complacency in status quo does not prove to be productive variables for the betterment of society growth. As we refer back to the factory assembly line and all of the individuals working together, we must consider what would happen if one of the pieces of the final product was defective. We also must consider the possibility that one of the original staff members could decide that the final product is no longer adequate or may be a threat to society. The functionalist approach to sociological ideals can be compromised.

Stigma of Giftedness

Although it is not enough to qualify structural functionalism for a major role in the field of gifted education, this paper suggests that there can be some benefits of research conducted with a functional scheme. Structural functionalism views the society as a complex system, of which individuals are the main constituents (Giddens, 1984). The types and nature of interactions and individuals' perceptions of others are worth discussing in order to shed light into this complexity. Gifted individuals are an important part of this complex system and presumably are seen as valuable resources for a society in different cultures. Gifted individuals sometimes are perceived by others as elitist, superior, or critical (Geake & Gross, 2008). For this reason, they may have behavioral expectations from the society they

inhabit. The literature on gifted students suggests that these expectations are connected to the experience of stigmatization. This is also related to a question of whether behaviors in the society are aligned with the norms and values of that society. Parsons (1961) argued that there would never exist any perfect fit between individual behaviors and social norms. Perhaps one reason is that in such a complex system it is almost impossible to manage how people perceive others and what specific factors influence those views and perceptions.

Durkheim (1895) was the first to use stigma as a social phenomenon. Goffman (1963) in the theory of social stigma explored stigma in more detail. Goffman described stigma as the difference between an individual's "virtual" and "actual" social identity (p. 3). This discrepancy is based on the judge's assessment of the degree of the stigmatized individual's fit into the assumptions of social and ideological acceptability (Cross, Coleman, & Terhaar-Yonkers, 1991). The physical appearance of gifted individuals tends to be acceptable to others, thus what strategies they are engaged in to fulfill the expectations of the accepted group are related to their less obvious intellectual differences. Coleman (1985) described the Stigma of Giftedness and argued that people treat gifted students differently when they learn of their giftedness. Coleman and his colleagues (e.g., Coleman & Cross, 1988; Coleman & Sanders, 1993; Cross, Coleman, & Stewart, 1993; Cross, Coleman, & Terhaar-Yonkers, 1991) framed the experience of giftedness in schools in terms of stigma in several studies. These studies suggested that the presence of stigma does not have to be proven objectively, because normal social interactions will be distorted even if only the gifted individual believes the stigma is present.

Educator Bias and Stereotypes

Identification of gifted students often is based on teacher recommendation. Hence, it is important to determine if teachers have some stereotypic beliefs that could bias the selection of participants for gifted programs. Siegle (2001)

stated that teachers' beliefs, biases, and expectations can influence the identification of gifted students and their placement. Stereotyping is "the unconscious or conscious application of knowledge of a group in judging a member of the group" (Banaji & Greenwald, 1994, p. 58). Stereotypes can be placed on gender, race, age, and physical appearance. In addition, the dialect someone speaks, the accent or language an individual uses, and the occupation an individual holds (or in a student's case, the occupation of their parent) can impact ideals in stereotype identifications.

Several studies suggested that teachers hold negative attitudes toward gifted students (Geake & Gross, 2008). Some studies found that teachers have negative attitudes toward students of culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds (Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, & Holloway, 2005; George & Aronson, 2003; Moon & Brighton, 2008). For example, primary-grade teachers were found to have difficulty in thinking about a gifted student who comes from a minority culture or a low-socioeconomic background (Moon & Brighton, 2008). Elhoweris et al. (2005) revealed that teachers who nominate students for gifted programs were less likely to make referral for black students than students who had not been identified as African American. Carman (2011) explored the levels of stereotypic views about gifted individuals by educators and found that both pre-service and in-service teachers hold stereotypical thoughts about the gifted in multiple areas.

Interestingly, educators who have interests in educating gifted students still hold stereotypical beliefs (House, 1979; Powell & Siegle, 2000). House (1979) indicated that educators who are interested in gifted education hold stereotypes related to the gender and age. Powell and Siegle (2000) found that teachers attending a gifted conference held stereotypes on the gender and production level.

Educator biases may also occur due to unfamiliarity with standardized tests. School psychologists or teachers may be unaware of the potential hazards of these tests and may become

misinformed consumers of test scores. Standardized tests such as IQ tests are widely used instruments in the gifted identification process. In some school districts cutoff scores on tests are used as the sole criterion to decide whether a student should be included or excluded from a gifted program. When the results of these tests are misinterpreted by the educators, there may arise a serious threat to the gifted education programs. Harrington (2001) in his article on improper application of standardized IQ tests presented several hazards that can bias IQ scores of gifted children. One of these hazards is that so-called *low incidence* populations remain underrepresented in the standardization norms of these tests. Thus, these populations are more likely overlooked for gifted educational programs.

Discussion on the Possible Solutions to the Challenges

Looking at education through the functionalist lens (structural consensus theory and consensus perspective) maintains that values rely heavily on what is perceived as important for the common good. Socialization (learning skills and attitudes in schools), skills provision (skills for the economy), and role allocation (allocating people to the most appropriate jobs for their talents) are all emphasized through the functionalist's perspective (Byrant, 2011). However, there are many facets within the education field that have become paramount to understanding the effectiveness of our education system universally. Specifically, the strides that the gifted education world has made to increase the understanding of the importance of providing services for gifted students. As teachers begin to understand the importance of dedicating differentiated instruction to a group of learners who have already met state and national requirements in the classroom, students in gifted education will begin to flourish above their own expectations. Currently, educators see the gifted education program as being less valued due to the emphasis on meeting standard state and federal requirements.

The necessity of special provisions for the gifted can be understood most clearly when this population is perceived as a legitimate part of special education. Without the shield of special education, it is difficult to justify why gifted children should have differentiated programs. Exceptional children are significantly different from the norm; therefore, they fail to thrive without modifications. The purpose of special provisions for exceptional children, whether educational or counseling, is to respond to their unique needs. Although it is relatively clear that children in every other branch of special education have unique needs, this assumption has not been widely endorsed for the gifted and has to be made explicit (Silverman, 1993).

Today, the gifted community (parents, school leaders, political figures, and students) have joined together to advocate for fair treatment associated with learning abilities and how gifted students should be taught. "If the goal of an educational program is to help students grow and learn, then the program must start at the level where students currently are working, and then challenge them in their Zone of Proximal Development" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). The functionalist viewpoint contends that a consensus has been made by an influential group of people stating how someone is identified, what types of activities accentuate this type of student's learning skills, and who is responsible for this learning. Functionalism influenced the educational system, especially with regards to John Dewey's belief that children should learn at the level for which they are mentally prepared (Muhammad, 2009). Unfortunately, the functionalist approach to education is that students are all programmed to be placed in occupations based on their developmental needs, and eventually they will be assigned to their functional role in society. An overall functionalist consensus, nationwide, has not been established, but strides are being made to educate policy makers on the current inequality of current programs and the ways to create equality.

Gifted Students in Higher Education

Many aspects of gifted education appear similar at all levels, but the higher education setting has unique challenges therefore are discussed separately in this section. The previously mentioned challenges are not solely experienced by gifted students in K-12. Gifted young adults may face similar problems in their lives during the college years, or connected to career selection, and employability. Gifted students in Higher Education may also find their educational experience challenged and have low self-esteem due to boredom, ineffective faculty engagement, lack of resources or in many cases the inability to find like peers to challenge them academically and with whom they can relate to socially.

Robinson, Shore, and Enersen (2007) found students develop their self-concept through peer interactions and comparing him or herself with others. When they have a difficult time finding like peers -- or the gifted student is introverted and likes to be alone at times (highly prevalent in gifted students) -- the student can develop self-esteem issues because he or she feels the need to be alone yet be part of the group. Gifted students may even suffer from adjustment disorders due to self-concept issues or not being able to adjust socially.

Also, although university settings are replete with opportunities for gifted students to stretch socially and be exposed to perhaps a more diverse community than experienced in the high school years gifted students can still find themselves struggling for a variety of reasons, many of them not just based on their self-perceptions but the biases of faculty and instructors or the lack of a gifted *program* in the higher education setting. Especially in higher education settings, faculty may believe gifted students will do just fine on their own. Lycan (2009) offered that at the undergraduate level most gifted students find themselves in honors programs because programs for the gifted do not exist at many universities, especially more selective and prestigious universities. According to Dressel (1971) (as cited

in Lycan 2009), “. . . in their faculty's opinion, the programs were not needed at their selective institutions. Because of the high standards for acceptance and retention for the college as a whole, these institutions rejected the idea that their students lacked challenges from their standard, demanding curriculum.” (p.2). Lycan also found that honors housing can help gifted students develop a social network of like peers thus feeling he or she fits in as well as an outlet for effective peer mentoring.

Borland (1989) believed a *systems* approach was best when planning and designing gifted programs stating a needs assessment should be done first to understand how this subsystem fit into the larger system. Borland advocated for a “program that is a unified realization of the required response to the system’s deficiencies (a systematic program)” (p. 51). Such an approach looks good through the functionalist lens and an honors housing subsystem within the larger university fits within the functionalist paradigm. Herbert (2006) (as cited in Lycan, 2009) also noted the need for enrichment without which gifted students “may become lost in the larger university environment, disconnected from enrichment opportunities, and disenchanted with the collegiate world, all of which can affect their achievement motivation for the university as a whole, to include their schoolwork” (p. 65).

Although the college setting encourages students to think outside the box and explore their talents in creative ways, the functionalist approach will require a gifted student to determine where he or she fits into society as a whole to make a contribution. The gifted student may struggle to determine how best to harness his or her talents in a way that is employable upon graduation. She or he may feel anxious about finding the right fit in the job market which is today in a downturned economy more competitive than ever, with recent college graduates one of the highest populations of the unemployed. Shierholz, Davis, and Kimball (2014) concluded “Graduating in a bad economy has long-lasting economic consequences. For the next 10 to 15 years, those in the Class of 2014 will likely earn less than if they had graduated when job

opportunities were plentiful” (p. 4). From a functionalist standpoint, ensuring university-level gifted students are well equipped with both academically stimulating materials, and the right kind of education that will transfer to employable skills and contribute to society, is critical to the future of a well-functioning society.

Conclusion

In this paper, we explored the challenges in the field of gifted education from the structural functionalism standpoint. Two main challenges that were mentioned in this paper are stigma of giftedness and educator biases. Related to these, several other issues that gifted individuals face in K-12 and higher education were discussed. One of the implications of this study is that students who were identified as gifted experience various academic and psychosocial difficulties in their lives. For this reason, gifted education programs and curriculum should be consistent with the standards that address students’ individualized needs. Gifted education is viewed to be elitist by many others. A student who is identified as a gifted becomes part of a community of learners with many connotations associated with the gifted label. Although students who are identified as gifted learn at a different pace, using a variety of methods to encourage well thought-out relationships between a learning activity and how it relates to the world, and possess an ability to qualify their explanations in such a manner that shows a thorough understanding of a topic, they are often not provided the resources needed to fulfill their educational needs. Much like students who are identified as needing resources to provide for remediation opportunities and specialized instruction due to a disability, the gifted student should also be afforded the same opportunities to grow at his or her accelerated pace.

Because of the questionable value and efficacy of current gifted education programs, another implication is a need of paradigm shift. According to Borland (2003), the normal practice in gifted education derives from the functional

paradigm, which governs social and educational thought today. From the perspective of this paradigm, modern Western society is uniquely meritocratic where roles are achieved and earned rather than ascribed and inherited. The functional paradigm defines schools as institutions that are responsible for "...the sorting and selection of talents" (Hurn, 1993, p.47). This and other similar qualities that schools are responsible for production and creation characterize today's Western society. The belief behind this characterization is that "educational institutions sort and select talented people in a way, however imperfect, that is greatly superior to selection on the basis of such ascribed characteristics as potential social status, religion, or race" (Hurn, 1993, pp. 52-53). Borland argued that both the functional paradigm as a general framework for understanding educational issues and for conducting educational practice, and its specific realization in the field of gifted education are open to serious criticism. Both aspects of this argument are signaling, perhaps, the need for a paradigm shift.

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