Gifted Children: How Different Are They?

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Lebensumweltanalyse hochbegabter Kinder das Marburger Hochbegabtenprojekt
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Review by
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It is not easy to find an adequate English translation for the title of this book. Perhaps “analysis of gifted children’s living circumstances” comes closest to what the editor had in mind. The title indicates that the book deals with a rather broad and heterogeneous category. A closer look at the table of contents reveals that it not only includes family relations, toy possession and use, aspects of children’s personality and temperament, and their achievement-related cognitions but also parents’ achievement goals, their perception of educational support for gifted children, and the identification of gifted children by teachers.

This book differs from most edited volumes in that it is a documentation of a comprehensive research project directed by the editor. All of the contributors collaborating in this project focus on one or more of the research themes outlined above. The book chapters are very similar in structure: After a short overview of the state of the art of the respective research problem, the authors give a detailed account of the measurement instruments and the methods of data analysis (mostly analyses of variance and exploratory factor analyses) they used to tackle the research problem in question. One obvious advantage of this conception is that one has no problems with reconstructing the details of this research project. However, the repetition of content structure in the various chapters of this book certainly does not add to its interest. I sometimes found it difficult to keep motivated when going through the individual contributions of this volume.

One of the special merits of the project concerns the selection of samples. In the first step of analysis, more than 7,000 elementary school children were presented with several intelligence tests that tapped different aspects of g (i.e., general intelligence). Subjects with extremely high g scores (n = 151) were kept as the core sample of gifted children and compared to a sample with average IQ scores (n = 136). Each child in the comparison sample was matched to a gifted child with regard to school and classroom, and an attempt was made to control for socioeconomic status.

The author’s definition of giftedness focusing on g certainly deviates from contemporary multidimensional approaches that do not equate giftedness with general intelligence but additionally consider creativity and personality variables like task commitment (e.g., the three-ring conception of giftedness by Renzulli, 1986). However, Rost and colleagues provide sound arguments for their decision to use specific intelligence tests, they were not similarly specific when it came to explaining the choice of the remaining variables.

The second problem I had with the volume concerns the fact that no attempts were made to relate the various theoretical aspects of the study. For example, although possible interrelations between personality and temperament variables were discussed at length, empirical analyses concerning these two constructs were described in separate chapters. From a theoretical point of view, it could have been interesting to explore the commonalities and differences between the temperament and personality measures within the samples of gifted and normal children. Similarly, it seems worthwhile to analyze links between aspects of self-concept, causal attributions, and emotional stability within the two groups. Given the potential of the data, I hope that the authors will follow up these suggestions in subsequent secondary analyses.

Finally, I missed a concluding chapter.
integrating the outcomes of the numer­ous analyses and relating the findings to the existing literature. A closer look at the various chapters shows that the dis­cussion sections are rather short com­pared with the presentation of results. Thus, an integrative summary chapter could have been helpful in view of the diversity of empirical findings. Despite these problems, however, I recommend the book for all those who are interested in issues of giftedness and its relation to aspects of children's personality, their family experiences, and their educational environment. I find it unfortunate that an English version of the book is not yet available. It certainly deserves a larger audience.

References


This edited volume aims to advance understanding of how development occurs as a function of the contexts of children's lives. It reflects an increasing interest throughout psychology in ex­ploring how to go beyond focusing ex­clusively on individuals as the topic of analysis. The issue is a classic one in the field: how to conceptualize the relation between people and the environment. Few would disagree with the premise that the context matters. The question is one of how to conceptualize its relation­ship with the individual. The authors of Context and Development—developmental, cross-cultural, family, and edu­cational psychologists—present a col­lection of ways that the problem of con­text and development is pursued in different areas of psychology.

The relation between individual and context has been handled prototypically by conceiving of the person and the en­vironment as independent entities, with one acting on the other, or with bidirec­tional influence. An alternative that has been less easily assimilated in psychol­ogy—proposed by scholars such as Dewey and Bentley, Pepper, Piaget, Gibson, Vygotsky, Leont'ev, Angyal, and Kantor—is that the individual and the environment are inseparable. Rogoff (1982) contrasted the interactional ap­proach (in which person and context are independently defined and the aim is to examine their interaction) and the con­tectual event approach (in which it is as­sumed that individuals and contexts are mutually defining, as people participate in contextual events that they both con­stitute and are constituted by).

In the introductory chapter of this volume, Cohen and Siegel call for the contextual event approach:

Context is a melding of person and environ­ment. Context includes the consideration of persons (conceptualized as active, constructive, information processors, replete with a past history and current sets of agenda, goals, expectations, etc.) as embedded within sets of social relationships (proximal and distal), and within a physical setting (offering behav­ioral opportunities and constraints), all de­veloping over time. (p. 18)

Cohen and Siegel's proposal is extended by an extremely thoughtful Chapter 2 by Houts, which provides an account of world hypotheses and root metaphors, building on Pepper's approach. Houts discusses strong and weak forms of context­ualism and discusses methodological choices that would follow from each. As Houts points out, often the methodolog­ical and theoretical approaches espoused by authors (including many in this vol­ume) contradict each other. The methods applied sometimes are less contextual than the conceptualization offered.

The remainder of the book involves a mix of approaches to considering contex­tual issues. Although many of the chap­ters are interesting in their own right, the stance that they take with regard to how to conceptualize contextual issues is often implicit rather than discussed as a focus of the chapters. However, through noting how contextual matters are treated em­pirically or by reference to other work, we infer that a good number of the chap­ters fit the interactional model. They treat context as an outside influence on indi­viduals, each defined independently of the other. At times, the chapters treat context as an influence on individuals; at other times, they examine bidirectional approaches. However, even very com­plex systems approaches to bidirectional approaches do not become contextual in the way called for in Cohen and Siegel's and Hout's chapters. They portray a dualistic view, with context as a separate

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