

Choosing Excellence

David Lubinski and Camilla P. Benbow
Vanderbilt University

Plucker and Levy (2001, this issue) were correct in pointing out that intellectual precocity comes with unique challenges. Almost all personal attributes that differ from the norm in salient ways do. As well, it is a challenge to cover all pertinent issues surrounding a topic in a 14-page article. Our contribution to the *American Psychologist's* special issue on positive psychology certainly did not meet that expectation (Lubinski & Benbow, January 2000). Our intent, however, was to provide an in-depth presentation of our theoretical model for talent development. We believe our conceptual framework (Lubinski & Benbow, 2000), which is being tested through our longitudinal study (Achter, Lubinski, Benbow, & Eftekhari-Sanjani, 1999; Benbow, Lubinski, Shea, & Eftekhari-Sanjani, 2000; Lubinski, Webb, Morelock, & Benbow, in press), is useful in identifying unique intellectual strengths, facilitating the development of such strengths, and suggesting ways to enhance psychological well-being throughout the talent-development process and across the life span. That task seemed to fit well with the theme of the special issue, which focused on ways to construe positive development.

We do, however, view the development of extraordinary expertise as a choice involving trade-offs, and indeed, choosing to achieve genuine excellence has costs. For example, intimacy with one's peers often must be compromised—a very difficult choice. It is understandable then that excellence is so rare. Yet, what one person considers an intense sacrifice, others may view as a minor inconvenience or even as a source of satisfaction, and this, among other things, contributes to the profound differences among gifted individuals in their ultimate career paths (Lubinski & Benbow, 2000, p. 143, Figure 2). High ability does not inform researchers about the magnitude of people's interests, the intensity of their desire to achieve, or what would be seen as a personal sacrifice. That is why assessment across multiple domains can be so helpful—a point that we have tried to make in our articles (Achter, Lubinski, & Benbow, 1996; Achter et al., 1999; Benbow & Stanley, 1996; Lubinski, Benbow, & Morelock, 2000).

For the most part, gifted individuals appear to be aware that developing their abilities requires much time and hard work (Benbow et al., 2000), and they tend to make choices

based on personal preferences. We have argued that both short- and long-term choices are more conducive to psychological well-being when they take into account the salient features of a person's individuality. In our empirical work and theorizing, therefore, we have assimilated affective, cognitive, and conative (individual-differences) attributes to facilitate decision making from a personal point of view (Benbow & Lubinski, 1996; Benbow & Stanley, 1996; Lubinski & Benbow, 2000).

Life choices are complex, and the affordances (opportunities) defining the environmental niches that people traverse are in a constant state of flux. In this respect, the gifted are no different from others. In some respects, however, the friends, family, teachers, and employers of gifted individuals are frequently more invested in influencing how they "choose" to develop, because their potential is seen as so great. That can be felt as or result in excess pressure. To sort things out, being in touch with those aspects of self that have primacy and are likely to be stable (Achter et al., 1999; Lubinski, 2000; Lubinski et al., 2000) can serve as a developmental compass to gifted individuals navigating the often turbulent seas of life.

REFERENCES

- Achter, J. A., Lubinski, D., & Benbow, C. P. (1996). Multipotentiality among the intellectually gifted: "It was never there and already it's vanishing." *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 43*, 65-76.
- Achter, J. A., Lubinski, D., Benbow, C. P., & Eftekhari-Sanjani, H. (1999). Assessing vocational preferences among intellectually gifted adolescents adds incremental validity to abilities: A discriminant analysis of educational outcomes over a 10-year interval. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 91*, 777-786.
- Benbow, C. P., & Lubinski, D. (Eds.). (1996). *Intellectual talent: Psychometric and social issues*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Benbow, C. P., Lubinski, D., Shea, D. L., & Eftekhari-Sanjani, H. (2000). Sex differences in mathematical reasoning ability: Their status 20 years later. *Psychological Science, 11*, 474-480.
- Benbow, C. P., & Stanley, J. C. (1996). Inequity in equity: How "equity" can lead to inequity for high potential students. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 2*, 249-292.
- Lubinski, D. (2000). Scientific and social significance of assessing individual differences: "Sinking shafts at a few critical points." *Annual Review of Psychology, 51*, 405-444.
- Lubinski, D., & Benbow, C. P. (2000). States of excellence. *American Psychologist, 55*, 137-150.
- Lubinski, D., Benbow, C. P., & Morelock, M. J. (2000). Gender differences in engineering and the physical sciences among the gifted: An inorganic-organic distinction. In K. A. Heller, F. J. Monks, R. J. Sternberg, & R. F. Subotnik (Eds.), *International handbook for research on giftedness and talent* (2nd ed., pp. 627-641). Oxford, England: Pergamon Press.
- Lubinski, D., Webb, R. M., Morelock, M. J., & Benbow, C. P. (in press). Top 1 in 10,000: A 10-year follow-up of the profoundly gifted. *Journal of Applied Psychology*.
- Plucker, J. A., & Levy, J. J. (2001). The downside of being talented. *American Psychologist, 56*, 75-76.

Correspondence concerning this comment should be addressed to David Lubinski, Department of Psychology and Human Development, Box 512, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37203. Electronic mail may be sent to david.lubinski@vanderbilt.edu.