Stereotypes of Social Isolation and Early Burnout in the Gifted: Do They Still Exist?

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At the turn of the century, two common stereotypes of genius were that precocity was associated with social failure and that precocity bred early burnout. Later research on the gifted has refuted these stereotypes. The two studies in this paper investigate whether the stereotypes have changed in light of this new knowledge. In the first study, 66 male and 61 female college students rated gifted, able, and average males and females. In the second study, 60 male and 59 female college students rated males and females with various extreme levels of precocity. In both studies, the stimulus persons were rated as high schoolers and as adults. Results indicate that the perception of the gifted, especially females, as encountering serious social problems is still prevalent. The illusion of burnout, however, has been replaced with an illusion of unqualified success.

INTRODUCTION

When Terman began his seminal study of the gifted in the early 1900s, one of his prime research goals was to investigate the then-current image of genius as being associated with madness (Terman, 1954). Becker, a sociologist, has extensively analyzed the content, history, and basis of this stereotype (1978). The stereotype, most frequently cited from the works of Lombroso (1895), stressed two factors. One related to the emotional and social maladjustment of genius. In the extreme form, this developed into full psychosis. In milder forms, it led to deviant behavior and isolation.

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Another element in the stereotype of the gifted was that their precocious triumphs would be associated with early and tragic collapse. This stereotype was termed the *early ripe, early rot* hypothesis (Sears, 1979). This stereotype was common in academic circles from 1840 to 1950, its peak popularity being the time period in which Terman began work, i.e., 1880–1920. Even in recent years, however, there have been professional publications with this theme (e.g., Martindale, 1971).

Becker suggests that the disappearance of the “mad genius” controversy from the professional literature after World War II resulted from a change in assumptions regarding genius. The earlier position, supported primarily by physicians and psychiatrists, had assumed that high intellectual ability was a form of genetic deviancy, carrying with it other signs of abnormality. Another underlying assumption was the Romantic image of writers and musicians as suffering from heightened sensibilities and lack of restraint. Becker notes that the new influence of professional psychologists changed these assumptions. The topic of “genius” with its mystical overtones disappeared, to be replaced with that of the “gifted,” which simply implied a high degree of a common ability.

Today, however, the consensus of research seems to be that the gifted child is generally well adjusted and successful. Terman's original study found that children with high IQs were likely to be popular, to be emotionally stable, and to hold positions of leadership (Terman, 1925). Although there have been arguments with the representativeness of his sample, other studies have made the same conclusions regarding popularity (see Brody and Benbow, 1986, Clark, 1979, and Newland, 1976, for reviews). The longitudinal studies based on Terman’s work showed that as adults these persons continued to be emotionally healthy, and that they earned advanced degrees, honors, and professional distinction at a high rate (Oden, 1968; Sears and Barbee, 1977; Terman and Oden, 1959). This image of success has also been supported by other studies (see Laycock, 1979, for a review; also Barbe, 1955; Faunce, 1967; Nicol and Astin, 1966; Watley, 1969; Watley and Kaplan, 1971).

The research literature now seems to reserve the problems of vulnerability and social isolation for students with extremely high levels of ability. Hollingworth's study (1942) of children with IQs over 180 demonstrated their difficulties with finding friends. More recent research has generally supported these points (see Austin and Draper, 1981, and Janos and Robinson, 1985, for reviews). Another subset of the gifted who have been identified as suffering from emotional, social, and achievement problems are underachievers. Whitmore (1980) notes that the interest in underachievers arose in the late 1950s, the time when Becker maintains that the image of the instability of genius was fading. Rather than applying to