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# Giftedness as a Developmental Construct That Leads to Eminence as Adults: Ideas and Implications From an Occupational/Career Decision-Making Perspective

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## Abstract

The proposal of Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell (2011) on rethinking giftedness and gifted education has a number of implications from an occupational/career decision-making perspective. In this examination of their ideas, consideration is given to the literature in vocational psychology/career development, the emerging findings on the occupational/career decisions of gifted adolescents, and the existing research in gifted education. The new model represents a timely platform and impetus for a constructive discussion and debate on rethinking and advancing the field of gifted education.

## Keywords

definition and concept of giftedness/talent, career development, vocational psychology

Decision-making appears to be a fundamental aspect of human existence, and in modern life, economic, social, and technological advances increase the number of decisions people face in their lifetime (Crozier & Ranyard, 1997). These decisions can range from those with minimal consequences, such as routine everyday purchases, to more significant decisions, such as marriage or the purchase of property. There is variation in the amount of thought and effort that may be devoted to making decisions of varying degrees of importance for the decision maker. Of these decisions, one that is highly critical for most individuals, including those who are gifted, is the decision about one's future occupation or career.

The occupation or career decision is important for a number of reasons. First, it may have long-term repercussions, as it "can commit someone to a long term career path" (Creed, Patton, & Prideaux, 2006, p. 48). Johnson and Mortimer (2002) noted that the occupational/career decision has potentially life-changing consequences for one's status in a community, earnings, wealth, and lifestyle. Some have suggested that the choice of occupation or career may be linked to the social meaning of people's lives (Young & Collin, 2000). Moreover, substantial costs can often arise from making an "incorrect" occupational/career decision, "changing" the decision at a later stage of life, or being unable to make such a decision.

The occupational or career destinations of gifted individuals should be an important focus for the field of gifted

education, as it is the likely context in which most gifted individuals will have the opportunity to translate their exceptional abilities into significant achievements that advance knowledge and/or affect the lives of others in society. If we are to consider gifted individuals to be the "source of our future national leaders, scientists, entrepreneurs, and innovators" (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011, p. 11), it is only logical that occupational and career considerations should inform any educational efforts aimed at this group. Such an approach to the education of our brightest youth may be substantially easier if we have models and definitions of giftedness that are consistent or compatible with the literature in vocational psychology or career development, and our knowledge base of the career decisions of gifted individuals.

The ideas on rethinking giftedness and gifted education proposed by Subotnik et al. (2011) represent a new and interesting approach to reconceptualizing giftedness and gifted education. Their approach has a number of strengths. For example, they explicitly acknowledge the domain-specific nature of developmental trajectories and highlight the role of

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psychosocial variables in the promotion of outstanding achievement. Furthermore, although some may disagree with the conceptualization of giftedness as a developmental construct, it may be a conceptualization that is somewhat consistent with common stereotypes about gifted individuals at different stages of their life. Regardless of how outstanding abilities and achievements are labeled and described, many societies *would* expect an individual's outstanding abilities to be translated into outstanding achievements as he or she gets older and moves into adulthood.

Subotnik et al.'s (2011) ideas are indeed relevant to the occupational and career decisions of gifted individuals. Occupational and career decisions were first investigated when industrialization and urbanization in North America and Europe led to the creation of a variety of specialized jobs from which people could choose (Savickas, 2007; Savickas & Baker, 2005). The first prototypical theory for occupational/career decision-making was developed in 1909 by Parsons, who in calling for a scientific and systematic approach to match people and jobs, proposed a three-step formula for the process (Brown, 2002; Savickas, 2007; Savickas & Baker, 2005). According to Parsons (1909), "there are three elements to the choice of a vocation: a clear understanding of one's aptitudes, abilities, interests, and resources, a knowledge of the different lines of work, and true reasoning of the relationship between these two groups of facts" (p. 5). Parsons's model remains highly influential as a cornerstone of many modern theories of occupational/career choice.

Today, the most influential occupational/career decision-making theories include the trait and factor theories (which focus on matching a person's characteristics with those of the occupation/career), the developmental theories (which examine an individual's developmental processes), and the social learning theories (which emphasizes external, social, and cultural influences on an individual; Brown, 2002; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Krumboltz, 1979; Osipow, 1990; Osipow & Littlejohn, 1995). Many of these theories, and particularly the trait and factor theories and the developmental theories, are psychologically based, as they focus on the individual characteristics of the decision makers, such as their abilities, interests, values, and personality.

Subotnik et al.'s (2011) conceptualization of giftedness as a developmental construct has obvious parallels with the *career developmental theories*. In Super's (1963, 1990) theory of career stages, or theory of career choice and development, an individual is seen to progress through different stages of vocational development by progressively mastering vocation-related tasks and goals. From birth, individuals start developing self-concepts informed by youthful fantasies, preferences for activities, and a developing skill base. As they grow older, their emerging self-concepts (which incorporate interests, abilities, and needs) inform the identification of many tentative vocational options. These options are explored and eventually narrowed, until final decisions are made to

pursue particular occupations or careers. Thereafter, these individuals establish themselves in chosen occupational fields, and subsequently maintain and consolidate their positions, before finally disengaging from the occupations/careers.

If Super's (1963, 1990) theory is applied to Subotnik et al.'s (2011) proposed model of giftedness, it may be argued that persons considered gifted for their entire life will be demonstrating high-level abilities in a particular domain as young children, translating these abilities into corresponding achievements in certain occupational/career fields in later years (after a stage of exploring and narrowing various occupational/career options), and eventually, developing and refining their abilities and achievements to produce outstanding achievements that advance knowledge and/or change the lives of others in society by late adulthood. For a gifted individual who has received appropriate educational and related interventions, it remains to be seen whether such achievements can be *expected* or *intended* to be at the level of eminence, or whether eminence should be considered only as an *aspiration* or a *goal*. The second of the two approaches may arguably be more realistic, and may better accommodate gifted individuals of different ability levels.

As meaningful and substantial achievements will usually be made within an occupational context (e.g., as a scientist, an elite/professional sportsperson, an entrepreneur, or a politician), the occupational or career decision may need to coincide with the point approaching the end of the "early stages," before the time when Subotnik et al. (2011) suggest that achievement will start to become the measure of giftedness. Indeed, Subotnik et al.'s proposed model could be extended and elaborated at this point where giftedness transitions from being predominantly explained by ability to achievement, to reflect occupational/career decision-making considerations. For example, a "transitional stage" could be newly incorporated, possibly outlining the factors or processes associated with an occupational/career decision, to highlight the pivotal *choice of the field* for a gifted individual's achievements. Many career decision-making theories may be considered to be substantially situated at this stage of the model, as they tend to have a focus on the period in an individual's life when the occupational/career decision is made.

Individual abilities, which Subotnik et al. consider to be a *necessary* condition for outstanding achievement, are an important factor impacting occupational/career decisions. Nevertheless, multiple studies (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Jung & McCormick, 2010, 2011a, 2011b; Jung, McCormick, Gregory, & Barnett, 2011; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002; Lubinski & Benbow, 2006) suggest that occupational/career decisions may also be influenced by a range of other factors such as one's interests, values, social influences, and cultural considerations (including psychological cultural perspectives, such as individualism and collectivism). It is noteworthy that Lubinski and Benbow (2000), while using the theory of work adjustment, proposed a model of talent development that considered both abilities and interests—two variables that appear

be “sufficiently uncorrelated” and need to be “assessed independently” (Lubinski & Benbow, 2006, p. 327). Consequently, the contexts in which some high-ability students will be demonstrating their achievements may not always coincide with their area(s) of high ability. A sparse but growing literature indeed suggests that the career decisions of gifted individuals may alternatively, or simultaneously, be based on (a) the preference for unimaginative and traditional careers (Kerr & Sordano, 2003; Leung, 1998), (b) the preference for careers that are compatible with one’s gender (Kerr & Sordano, 2003; Leung, 1998; Lubinski & Benbow, 2006; Miller & Cummings, 2009), (c) the valuing of high-paying careers (Emmett & Minor, 1993; Kelly & Cobb, 1991; Kerr & Sordano, 2003), and (d) the valuing of high-status/prestigious careers (Emmett & Minor, 1993; Leung, 1998; Lubinski, Webb, Morelock, & Benbow, 2001; Miller & Cummings, 2009). A stronger acknowledgement by Subotnik et al. of such factors in the proposed model may better reflect the complex nature of the relationship between ability and achievement (and any translation of high-level ability into high level achievement) for gifted individuals.

An issue that may complicate the occupational/career decision is the finding that some gifted individuals may have multiple areas of high ability (Emmett & Minor, 1993; Kerr & Sordano, 2003; Milgram & Hong, 1999), which together with tendencies toward perfectionism (Gross, MacLeod, & Pretorius, 2003; VanTassel-Baska, 1998), may lead to occupational or career *indecision* (Emmett & Minor; Leung, 1998; Parris, Owens, Johnson, Grbevski, & Holbert-Quince, 2010). Occupational or career indecision is a widely studied phenomenon in vocational psychology/career development and refers to an inability reach a decision about one’s future occupation or career (Guay, Senécal, Gauthier, & Fernet, 2003; Leong & Chervinko, 1996). In the model proposed by Subotnik et al. (2011), a gifted individual experiencing career indecision may experience delays in the demonstration of achievement and may consequently lose the giftedness label, even if this is only temporary. For such individuals, along with those who choose to pursue occupations/careers outside of their area(s) of high ability and those who do not achieve eminence in late adulthood, the question is raised as to whether they should cease to be considered gifted. Gagné (2003, 2009), who proposed a model that classifies talent using a taxonomy of occupations, has an alternative approach to defining giftedness which addresses the issue by retaining the term giftedness for individuals of high ability (regardless of the level of their achievement) and reserving the term *talent* for individuals demonstrating outstanding levels of achievement. Perhaps greater attention could be devoted to the construct talent, and its possible distinction from giftedness, in the model proposed by Subotnik et al. A distinction between giftedness and talent along the lines of Gagné may provide the basis for the retention of a certain status for some “underachieving” high-ability individuals, which may distinguish them from others who do not possess similar levels of ability.

Notwithstanding the above, elements of Subotnik et al.’s (2011) model are consistent with the literature suggesting that gifted individuals may (a) have a need to live up to their potential (Emmett & Minor, 1993), (b) have high self-expectations and aspirations (Emmett & Minor, 1993; Greene, 2006), and (c) experience substantial pressures from family and society (Emmett & Minor, 1993; Grant, Battle, & Heggoy, 2000; Greene, 2003; Kerr & Sordano, 2003; Miller & Cummings, 2009; Stewart, 1999). Relatedly, gifted individuals appear to have superior access to career and related information (Greene, 2006; Kelly & Cobb, 1991; Stewart, 1999), which may arguably result in a more sophisticated, rational, and informed type of career decision-making that gives due acknowledgment to the multiple factors in the decision, including one’s abilities and the related expectancies for occupational/career success. All these factors may drive the translation of a gifted individual’s abilities into outstanding achievement, and in some cases, eminence.

If debate and discussion in the field eventually concludes with the acceptance of Subotnik et al.’s proposed model in its present form, a number of immediate changes to existing practice may be considered by educators, psychologists, and counselors to accommodate for the occupational/career decisions of gifted individuals. First of all, in acknowledgement of the different domain-specific developmental trajectories, some of which can start at a very young age, it may be necessary for career counseling, education, and assessment to commence, or be available, from a very early age. Second, it may be necessary to reassess gifted education programs so that they are informed by, and align with, the possible long-term occupational/career objectives of gifted individuals. Third, to maximize the translation of the abilities of gifted students into meaningful later achievements in occupational/career contexts, the systematic training of psychosocial skills could be incorporated into gifted education and career education programs. Finally, perhaps career guidance and counseling should be focused on directing gifted individuals toward those occupational/career options that are most likely to lead to outstanding achievement, and even eminence. Nevertheless, the desirability of such an approach, possibly at the expense of options that lead to a more moderate level of achievement, but with the satisfaction of other personal goals (e.g., financial stability, social prestige, or happiness), will require further debate.

Regardless of the impact, Subotnik et al. (2011) should be applauded for their efforts to produce an ambitious reconceptualization of giftedness that draws on various elements of the numerous and sometimes conflicting models of giftedness that are in use today. Although all elements of the proposed model will not be accepted by everyone in the gifted education community, may it be the stimulus for a constructive discussion and debate to genuinely rethink and advance the field of gifted education. Some refinements to the proposed ideas may result in a model that better acknowledges the occupational or career contexts in which a gifted

individual's abilities may be demonstrated and translated into achievements.

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