On the Trail of $g$

A review of

Ungifted: Intelligence Redefined
by Scott Barry Kaufman
$29.99

Reviewed by

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My grandmother was born in the 19th century. She was blessed with 27 grandchildren, and I
was in the middle of this impressive pack of cousins. There was never any sense that my
grandmother had a favorite or that we were ranked in any way. No human characteristic was
more valued than any other, and we certainly never felt that we were being judged as worthy
or worthless on the basis of our various attributes. Occasionally in conversation Nanna
would note that, say, so and so was strongly built or some other was “brainy.” Brains,
however, did not trump brawn, in Nanna’s eyes, nor the other way round.

The clutch of “brainy” cousins—I was one—were the children of the two sons-in-law
who were schoolteachers. Nanna’s lack of interest in ranking us by “IQ” stood out so much
for me because it was in contrast to my father’s deep concern over the intellectual capacity
of his children. My mother once remarked, tongue in cheek, that each of us—my siblings
and I—had at one time or another been “developmentally delayed.” My father’s anxiety over
our ability made him occasionally fear that he detected the signs of feeble-wittedness in his offspring. I grew up in no doubt that the worst thing in the world to be was “stupid,” and I lived in dread that I would somehow manifest or acquire stupidity.

What separated Nanna’s worldview and my father’s was, of course, his professional training but most tellingly the invention of ways to measure “intelligence.” Although the designer of the first test, Alfred Binet, was adamant that his test measured only the current state of the test-taker’s competence and set no limits on future attainment, once the “IQ” genie was out of the bottle, things changed. With the popularization of intelligence testing came the ascendance of the view that IQ is a genetically based attribute, fixed and not amenable to environmental influence. That most of the people studying the topic were the IQ test “winners” made this view more likely to prevail. It has taken an IQ test “loser” to set the record straight.

Like Scott Barry Kaufman, author of *Ungifted: Intelligence Redefined*, I was a victim of the mania over intelligence and its measurement that followed Binet’s invention of intelligence testing. Kaufman, however, was not terrified of somehow losing his wits; he had been declared “special” as a young child and of low intellect. His life’s passion became understanding the thing—intelligence as widely defined and measured—that had made his childhood a misery. At the start of each of the chapters of his splendid book, he gives the next installment of the story of how he overcame the pejorative label slapped on him as a small child to win a PhD in psychology from Yale and become a successful author and academic.

The responses of those whom I have told about the book and its author are instructive. When I said that I read a book on intelligence written by a person who had been identified as a child as having special needs, the responses could be summed up as “Aw, that’s cute,” as if the author were academia’s version of Forrest Gump. Instead, Kaufman’s extraordinary story is proof of his thesis that intelligence is much more than what is measured by IQ tests, and my colleagues’ responses are proof that a fixed mind-set about intelligence still rules.

Kaufman traces the history of theories about intelligence and how to measure it, and the debates about its nature. He also provides an exhaustive and very useful summary and discussion of the research into the structures of intelligence and creativity, their neurological underpinnings, and the environmental features and personal characteristics that allow people to turn intellectual tendencies into real-world achievements.

That better predictors of lifetime achievement are personal qualities such as grit, persistence, passion, diligence, and a “hungry mind” directly contradicts the widely held and enthusiastically promoted idea that intelligence is fixed and all a matter of genes. This belief enables those “blessed” by their genotype to enjoy their own superiority and the others, the poor and/or incorrectly pigmented, to be held as deserving all they get—or, more correctly, don’t get, on the grounds of their innate inferiority.

Carol Dweck (2006) and her colleagues have proved beyond doubt that our culture’s infatuation with the belief that ability is inborn, fixed, and resistant to improvement does
immense harm, not only to those, like Kaufman, who are labeled *ungifted* but also to those, like me, who find themselves frozen in their tracks by the judgment that they are “gifted.” Society, channeled by my father, made it plain that only the smart ones mattered, and the threat was always that the initial judgment as “brainy” might turn out to be an error. From the lofty heights there was nowhere to go but down, in other words. As a child and young person, I was a classic example of Dweck’s “fixed” mind-set; Kaufman is the incarnation of the “growth” mind-set.

Kaufman marshals the evidence that supports the contention that human intelligence is a multifaceted and varied collection of skills, traits, tendencies, and attributes, all of which can contribute to greatness if cultivated and strengthened by deliberate practice and the acquisition of effective strategies. His book is a welcome resource for a time-poor generalist like myself with a strong interest in the area of human cognitive abilities. It is a gold mine of research and theory and will be of considerable value in the courses that I teach to preservice and practicing teachers. Teachers’ beliefs, as demonstrated by my father’s attitudes, matter immensely, as it is teachers who send messages to students every day about their ability and whether it can be grown.

Anyone teaching or researching in a wide range of psychological specialties and applied areas will find the book a valuable resource. Hopefully it will also garner the sort of media attention that will help to get the message out there that *g* is open to efforts to grow and improve it as well as not being the end of the human achievement story.

Reference