The Social Construction of Ability Perceptions : An Ethnographic Study of Gifted Adolescent Girls

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The Social Construction of Ability Perceptions:
An Ethnographic Study of Gifted Adolescent Girls

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The role of school and community contexts in the formation of gifted adolescent girls' self-perceptions of ability are explored in this article. Findings are based on an ethnographic study which used participant-observation, interviewing, and unobtrusive measures to collect data on girls' experiences in one middle school. The results of this study indicated that social interaction contributed to the development of self-perceptions of ability, and that self-perceptions of ability, in turn, influenced gifted girls' decisions about appropriate achievement-related behavior. The formation of ability perceptions was seen as a cyclic process: gifted girls' interpretations of significant others' beliefs about giftedness influenced their self-estimates of ability and classroom behaviors, and their behaviors brought them feedback about their own abilities.

Early adolescence has been characterized as a time when young people undergo dramatic changes in the way they perceive themselves, and in the things that are important to them (Blyth & Traeger, 1983). Females, in particular, may be vulnerable to changes that can cause disturbances in self-esteem and self-image. Studies have shown that a decline in self-esteem is characteristic of young adolescent girls (Thornburg, 1985b), and that, when general declines in self-esteem are found for students entering junior high, the decline is especially true for girls (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983, Rubenfeld & Schumer, 1986; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Simmons, Blyth, Van Cleave, & Bush, 1979). Other studies have indicated that girls are more sensitive than boys to school environments, particularly the hidden curriculum of schools (Davies, 1978), and that achievement, social acceptance, and gender identity are sources of conflict (Cook, 1976; Fox, 1978; Horner, 1972; Lavach & Lanier, 1975). It is not surprising that Hill and Lynch (1983), in a review of the literature on gender-related role expectations,

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concluded that girls' achievement behaviors begin to change during early adolescence, and that socialization is an important factor.

Little is known, however, about the self-perceptions of ability held by young adolescent girls who are identified as gifted and talented and placed in special programs (Reis, 1987; Shakeshaft & Palmieri, 1978). Are the sources of conflict experienced by females, in general, experienced to a greater degree by those who are labeled as gifted? The observation by Callahan (1979) that "girls earn higher grades in school, yet men write more books, earn more degrees, produce more works of art, and make more contributions in all professional fields" (p. 402), is an indication that the present understanding of gifted girls' ability perceptions and motivations is inadequate. Studies have shown that when the accomplishments of males and females are compared, the talented female is less likely to realize her adult potential (Callahan, 1981; Goertzel, Goertzel, & Goertzel, 1978). Although this achievement dilemma has been recognized since the 1970s, research has been concentrated primarily within two topic areas: the mathematically gifted female and the personality characteristics of adult females in various professions (Blaubergs, 1978; Fox, 1978; Hollinger & Fleming, 1988; Olszewski-Kubilius, Kulieke, & Krasney, 1988). Virtually no studies have been conducted to explore gifted girls' formation of ability perceptions, or the effects of perceptions on achievement motivation.

The link between ability perceptions and achievement motivation has, however, been widely accepted; perceptions of ability are an integral part of all cognitive theories of achievement motivation (Stipek, 1988). Recent research has shed new light on how ability perceptions may influence achievement-related behavior during early adolescence. Studies conducted by Nicholls and Miller (1984), Miller (1985), and Nicholls (1986) have indicated that during early adolescence students begin to differentiate between the concepts of ability and effort, conceptualizing ability as inherent capacity and effort as voluntary behavior less likely to lead to success. For example, Nicholls and Miller (1984) described a study in which early adolescents were shown a videotape of two actors, both of whom arrived at the correct answer, although one did so with considerably more effort. The young adolescents in the study said that the actor who worked hardest was less intelligent because he had to put forth more effort.

In addition, Miller (1985) found that the performance of sixth graders who equated ability with capacity was more impaired when they were placed in situations designed to make them think they would be revealed as lacking in ability. The impairment in performance, however, only occurred when students perceived that an achievement situation could potentially establish them as incompetent. As presented by Nicholls (1986), "the belief that one

lacks ability (or is about to be revealed as lacking in ability) should be more devastating for students who construe ability as capacity than for those who do not" (p. 7). Nicholls contended that conceptualization of ability as a global, stable trait affected students' motivation to achieve.

Consistent with this research is the Covington (1984) theory of self-worth. In self-worth theory, it is assumed that performance level, self-estimates of ability, and the degree of effort expenditure influence one's sense of worth and adequacy. Although accomplishments are considered important clues about ability, perceptions of high ability alone can imply worthiness. Conversely, great expenditures of effort which result in failure, can lead to perceptions of incompetence that result in shame (Covington & Omelich, 1979). This theory assumes that at the core of all classroom achievement-related behavior is the need for students to protect their sense of worth, and that students will employ a variety of failure-avoiding strategies to maintain this sense of worthiness.

Studies conducted thus far on students' perceptions of school experiences have indicated the importance of students' conscious attempts to make sense of the social and cognitive aspects of school. Students are active interpreters of classroom reality, sensitive to differential teacher behaviors toward high and low achievers, males and females. (See Weinstein, 1989, for a review of this literature.) "A simple but profound truth that emerges . . . is that environments do not influence motivation in any direct fashion, rather it is the perception of those environments that influences motivation (Berliner, 1989, pp. 317-318).

The role of perception or interpretation as a mediator of human experience is consistent with symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). From this theoretical perspective, how people interpret their experience is considered essential and constitutive, not accidental or secondary to what the experience is (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Self-perceptions are constructed as individuals interpret the gestures and actions directed toward them by others, and the meaning each attaches to his or her experiences is influenced by a complex set of social and cultural factors (Cziko, 1989). It is not the social norms, regulations, or beliefs people hold that are considered important in understanding their motivation and behavior, but how norms, regulations, and beliefs are interpreted and defined.

How young adolescents conceptualize ability and effort, and how these conceptions interact with the formation of self-perceptions of ability have important implications for students who are labeled as gifted. For gifted girls, who also are confronting issues of social acceptance and gender identity, the formation of self-perceptions may be further complicated. If, as Brookover and Erickson (1975) have noted, ability perceptions set limits on what we

decide to do, how young girls come to view their abilities may have long-term implications for their adult achievements.

The purpose of the study described here was to explore the ways gifted adolescent girls come to view their own abilities, and to describe how those perceptions influence achievement-related behaviors in school. In this study the following guiding questions provided a focus for data collection: (a) What kinds of achievement-related experiences do gifted girls have in a middle school setting in which they are members of heterogeneous teams as well as homogeneous gifted classes? and (b) How do girls use these experiences to construct behavior and beliefs about ability?

METHOD

The Research Site

The study was conducted in a public school in the Southeast that was widely recognized as an excellent middle school (Alexander & George, 1981). Located in a rural area just outside a major university city, the school's 442 students were organized into three heterogeneously grouped, interdisciplinary teams for instruction. These teams included teachers from different subject areas who were assigned a common area of the school building, a common schedule, and who shared the responsibility for a common group of students. Team areas were large, open-spaced portions of the building which had been subdivided into smaller classrooms by movable partitions, book cases, and other furniture.

The criteria for school selection were as follows: (a) the recognition of its exemplary status by experts in the field of middle level education; (b) the small population of gifted girls which was within reasonable bounds for regular and prolonged observation of the total population; (c) the open-spaced environment which enabled the researcher to move about and interact freely without disturbing the scene, maximizing the amount of classroom observation time; and (d) the enthusiastic acceptance of the study by students, parents, and teachers.

Participants

At the time of the study the school had identified 29 gifted students, of whom 10 were females in grades six through eight. Five of the girls were eighth graders, 2 were seventh graders, and 3 were in the sixth grade. To be identified for the gifted program in their district, students had to score 130

or above on a standardized IQ test. The girls in this study had scores ranging from 131-140. Their identification as gifted students resulted in placement in a special instructional program one day per week, and heterogeneous classes within the interdisciplinary team format the other 4 days.

The participants in this study were well known in both their community and the middle school. Eight of the girls had spent the majority of their school experience at the elementary and now the middle school in the same community, and seven of those had participated in the district's small gifted programs since the third grade. Only one student was a recent arrival in the community, having moved from a private school in a nearby city the year the study began.

The girls in this study reflected the predominantly White, middle- to upper-middle-class community in which they lived. Nine of the girls came from two-parent homes where the majority of mothers had equal or more formal education than the fathers. However, the mothers were employed in traditional female fields such as teaching, nursing, or library sciences, and most were not employed full time. Only one participant in the study was African-American; she, too, came from an upper-middle-class family in which her mother was employed as a nurse and her father as a physician.

Procedures

To discover how these girls defined ability and achievement, and the effects of the school culture on their perceptions, a topic-centered ethnographic approach was used (Evertson & Green, 1986). This perspective stresses a commitment to holism and the accurate portrayal of events from the point of view of the participants (Erickson, 1984; Lutz, 1981). It is particularly suited to the study of student perceptions for, as Wolcott (1976) noted, "the ethnographer's unique contribution is this commitment to understand and convey how it is to 'walk in someone else's shoes' and to 'tell it like it is'" (p. 25). In this study the researcher acted as a trained participant-observer, recording events in written field notes and on audiotapes as they occurred in the school setting; interacting with the girls and their friends informally before and after school, and during lunch; and conducting formal interviews to discover how gifted girls at the middle school constructed self-perceptions of ability.

This approach required that the researcher develop trust and rapport with the participants. After receiving approval to conduct the study from the University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, the county school board, and parents of the participants, an informal meeting was held with all 10 girls to answer questions, explain the goal of the study, and gain

their approval. Participants were told that the researcher wanted to write a book about gifted girls' experiences in school, and that their help would be needed to produce a factual account. In assuming the role of one who needed to be taught, the researcher stressed the idea that she "would not be offended by being told 'obvious' things and being 'lectured to'" (Loftland, 1971, p. 99). When other students at the school expressed curiosity about the study, they were told that the study's goal was to discover student perceptions about school.

Written field notes and audio recordings were begun immediately to establish the stance that, during the study, detailed accounts of the girls' experiences would be recorded (Cassell, 1978). The researcher believed this initial behavior with the girls was essential (a) to indicate that she cared about what they were saying, and was therefore writing it down; (b) to establish the pattern of continuous documentation; and (c) to allow the girls to express curiosity, question, and become comfortable with this method of data collection prior to its use in a regular classroom situation. During the first weeks of data collection, girls who expressed curiosity were allowed to read field notes of classroom observations and transcripts from their own interviews. To protect their anonymity, girls were asked to select a "secret" pseudonym to be used in field notes. Other steps taken to build trust and protect the confidentiality of the participants included an agreement between teachers and the researcher to refrain from discussing the data collected until the following school year, and to use only pseudonyms when referring to participants.

Two hundred hours of classroom activities were observed and recorded regularly from December to June of the school year. Observations were conducted 3 days a week, usually on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, in the gifted resource room and the heterogeneous classes in the team areas. Teachers were offered a schedule of observations, but did not indicate an interest in one.

Formal and informal interviews were conducted with the girls both individually and in small groups, with all team teachers, resource teachers, the principal, and five mothers who consented to be interviewed. Approximately 40 hours of interviews were recorded on audiotape and in writing.

Over the course of the study, additional informal interviews were conducted with boys identified as gifted, and with members of the student body at large. Many students sought the researcher out to talk about school and to provide their points of view on events or activities that were taking place at that time. Data from these interviews were used to compare other students' perspectives of events with those of the gifted girls in a search for negative examples and contradictions. These unsolicited interviews also were re-

garded as evidence of the level of the researcher's acceptance by students in the school environment. As Cassell (1978) noted, participant observers who hang around more and interact with students find their visibility decreases and their acceptance increases with time.

Finally, unobtrusive measures such as personal journals kept by the girls, report cards, class work, cumulative records, and school documents were routinely examined. The use of multiple methods to gather data increased the credibility of the study, enabling the researcher to compare data through triangulation (Denzen, 1978; Pelto & Pelto, 1978; Wolcott, 1976).

Analysis

The Developmental Research Model (Spradley, (1980) is cyclic in nature, in contrast to quantitative research models which proceed in a linear fashion from a statement of the hypothesis to the collection and analysis of data, to the research conclusion. In doing ethnography the researcher "generates a situation-based inquiry process, learning, through time, to ask questions of the field setting in such a way that the setting, by its answers, teaches the next situationally appropriate questions to ask" (Erickson, 1984, p. 51). The cycle is reflexive; the stages tend to co-occur and inform each other.

Analysis began with the construction of domains while the researcher was still in the field. In this stage of analysis the researcher coded and categorized data, looking for patterns through a continuous rereading of the field notes. As field notes and interview protocols accumulated, domains were reorganized and new domains were added. In this study, the domains that proved most useful in describing gifted girls' self-perceptions of ability included (a) confusing attitudes and expectations perceived by gifted girls, (b) ways to know you've done your best, (c) kinds of goals, (d) kinds of status, (e) things that are important (f) steps in getting a teacher to like you, (g) attributes of smart people, (h) differences between gifted girls and gifted boys, (i) reasons gifted girls believe gifted boys are not popular, and (j) responsibilities of students on a team.

A taxonomic analysis was then conducted to discover the organization of the domains. This analysis was conducted to reveal relationships among the specific examples listed within each domain and to uncover subsets and the ways individual terms were related to the whole. A taxonomy analysis led to the development of a theme, *ways to perceive ability*, which was constructed in the final stage of analysis.

Data collection and analysis focused on gifted girls' interpretations of actions and events. The methods described in this section enabled the researcher to "understand and capture the points-of-view [sic] of other

people, without predetermining those points-of-view through prior selection of questionnaire categories or rating scale forms " (Stainback & Stainback, 1984, p. 405).

Validity and Ethical Issues

The degree to which scientific observations record that which they purport to measure determines the validity of the study (Pelto & Pelto, 1978). This is a central issue in ethnography where the match between the research model and the world under study is its major strength. There are however, inherent problems in participant-observation studies. "Reactive effects of the phenomena being studied, distorting effects of selective perception and interpretation on the observer's part, and limitations on the observer's ability to witness all relevant aspects of the phenomena in question" (McCall & Simmons, 1969, p. 78) were considered in the design of this study. The selection of a site that was well known and regularly visited by a number of observers ensured that teachers and students were used to and comfortable with visitors. The open-space design of the campus made it easy to move about without attracting undue attention. During the first few weeks of data collection, girls who expressed an interest were allowed to read field notes of classroom events to encourage openness and trust, and so that girls felt responsible for clarifying events and acting as "key informants" about life at the school. The lengthy period spent on-site and the variety of methods used to collect data also were important in overcoming distorting effects of selective perception and the difficulty of witnessing all relevant events.

RESULTS

In this study, it appeared that girls' interpretations of their school experiences affected their perceptions of ability and achievement-related behaviors to varying degrees. Their attitudes and views about themselves both emerged from, and were moderated by, the influence of school experiences. The following conclusions represent a summary of the findings from this study.

1. The larger context of community and parental expectations were influential in the development of girls' perceptions of ability and their attitudes toward achievement.
2. Girls distinguished between ability and effort, believing that gifted boys had ability and were smart, whereas they, gifted girls, put forth effort and had only potential. To the girls in this study, students who had to work hard to "know

the right answer" were not smart. Girls' beliefs that effort was a less valuable trait were enhanced by a mismatch between their performance and teachers' conceptions of giftedness.

3. The girls attributed future success and happiness to being liked and accepted by others. They expressed a preference for teachers who were easier to please, and a belief that when teachers like and cared about them, their chances for successful performance increased. In addition, when specific skills or talents were perceived as having little social value, girls were more likely to devalue their abilities in those areas.

Socialization Outside School

In this study no attempt was made to sample the girls' lives outside the school context, although the community at large, and parents, in particular, surfaced frequently as influential components in the process of forming ability perceptions. Cziko (1989) has argued that predicting human behavior is problematic because the meaning one attaches to one's experiences is "influenced by an extremely complex myriad of social and cultural factors . . . and is a function of the totality of all previous experiences" (p. 18). For this reason it is important to describe the larger community context here because not only the girls in the study, but the school, too, was influenced by the community in which it existed.

Teachers, both long-time residents and newcomers, described the school's rural community as one which set limits on girls' awareness of achievement opportunities. In particular, they believed that community and home values were influential in the development of gifted girls' attitudes and behaviors in school. In some ways, this influence was seen as positive: it provided a well-defined set of behavioral norms for girls.

Mr. Clark: I've never had a weird [gifted] girl, but we've had some weird guys. Rick [gifted boy], for example, acts abnormally! He doesn't follow the norms of the school or the community. Our gifted girls all have consequences for poor performance at home, and the majority of them are interested in pleasing and doing well . . . I think our gifted girls try to please.

In other ways, the community's influence was perceived as negative in that it restricted girls' awareness of achievement opportunities.

Mrs. Drew: I don't see the aspirations for individual achievement here. I think it's because they don't see females in leadership roles and aren't brought up to see women as achievers . . . Gifted girls aren't super students in math. They tend to do well in language. [pause] I guess it's okay to do well in language.

As a lifetime resident of the community, who substituted for the gifted resource teacher one day in February, commented, "A lot of people here would never say they felt differently about boy-girl achievements, but I guess we behave that way."

Despite teachers' beliefs in the influence of community values on the gifted girls, teachers were unsure about the school's role in expanding their opportunities. Comments such as, "Kids come in with established patterns and all we can do is work with them!" and "The school can't do everything. The parent's emphasis makes a difference in the child's emphasis," were characteristic of the majority of teachers' beliefs. Only one female teacher, who had daily interactions with many of the gifted girls, described active attempts she had made to encourage one to sign up for an advanced math class. When her attempts proved unsuccessful, the teacher remarked to the researcher, "Why don't these girls want to develop their potential? I'm not sure there's a pat answer. I guess the school's role is to expose the student to as much information as possible to make a wise decision."

The girls were especially sensitive to the abilities and qualities they believed their parents valued. When probed about the accomplishments they would like to achieve, their answers centered on doing well to make parents proud or happy rather than naming specific, concrete accomplishments. In addition, their self-estimates of ability were often cast in terms of what they understood their parents to believe. Although four of the five mothers interviewed felt they encouraged their gifted daughters' aspirations, the girls were sensitive to limitations imposed by parents, as evidenced in their informal comments and journal entries.

> *7th grader*: I listen to my mother. I think she knows my potential. She doesn't encourage the idea of being a composer because it would be a hard job. Not many people do well. But it's not that she doesn't encourage me. She wants what's best for me.
>
> *8th grader's personal journal*: Up until the last few years my parents have encouraged my growing up. Now they sometimes disagree with my thinking [decision-making about the future]. It seems like I can't do anything right in their eyes.

Because the majority of girls placed a priority on pleasing their parents, high expectations related to their "giftedness" became a double-edged sword. Complaints that parents expected them to have less difficulty in school and ask fewer questions about homework were common. Particularly problematic were expectations that the girls make better grades than siblings who

were not in gifted programs. For example, after receiving a low grade in science, Elaine told the researcher, "When I don't get a good grade, I get the phone taken away or my stereo or I get restriction, but nothing happens when my sister gets the same grade!" On a similar occasion a sixth grader reflected, "I wish my mother had never found out about it [IQ score]. It's not that easy growing up. Even though I have a high IQ, I still have the same emotional problems my mom did though she only made B's."

Over the course of the study, multiple evidence was found concerning the influential nature of the community and parents on gifted girls' self-perceptions. Indeed, family and community values provided the background from which beliefs and attitudes were constructed, shaping girls' ideas about who they were as well as who they might become.

Giftedness and Self-Perceptions of Ability

As mentioned earlier, Nicholls (1986) has shown that around 12 years of age students' conceptualization of ability changes. Equating ability with capacity has been shown to inhibit the performance of students when they perceive they are in academic situations that could potentially reveal them as incompetent (Miller, 1985). Findings from the present study indicated that gifted girls faced a unique struggle to align their understanding of the meaning of ability with the expectations for classroom performance implied in their identification as gifted.

Definitions of giftedness. The concept of giftedness was an emotionally laden one for teachers at the middle school. To those who believed in the validity of the concept, giftedness meant the possession of exceptionally high IQ scores and the capacity to "strive for perfection." Some teachers, however, did not believe in the concept. To teachers in the latter group, giftedness was defined only as missing select students one day per week when students attended classes in the gifted resource room. Three factors were at the root of the ambivalence many teachers felt when asked to define giftedness: (a) teachers were disturbed that many gifted students did not strive for perfection in their classes and did not seem motivated, (b) the concept of giftedness implied a worthiness that teachers believed had a negative effect on all students at the school, and (c) pull-out programs caused curriculum management problems in that students who missed class once a week missed assignments, lectures and so on. In brief, the meaning of giftedness was a source of contention among the faculty members. (See Kramer, 1987, for detailed descriptions of teachers' definitions.)

Although teachers disagreed about the meaning of giftedness and whether such a term could be accurately applied in schools, they were in far greater agreement about the characteristics of the specific gifted girls in the study. To teachers, the gifted girls were less motivated, less enthusiastic, and less verbal in the classroom than were other girls in their classes. Additionally, gifted girls were described as less serious, less enthusiastic, and less outspoken than the boys who were identified as gifted. In general, teachers saw fewer differences between the behaviors of gifted and nongifted girls, and greater differences between the behaviors of gifted girls and gifted boys. Although teachers were aware that the behaviors they ascribed to the gifted girls might have stemmed from the girls' desires to avoid standing out, they commonly agreed that the gifted girls were "just like all little girls growing up." Noted one teacher, "I have trouble looking at these girls as being gifted. . . . The majority of the gifted girls are more interested in pleasing and doing well because it pleases the teacher." The conflict between teachers' definitions of giftedness and the behaviors of the gifted girls at the school were difficult for teachers to resolve. Teachers did, however, believe that their interactions with the girls were not affected by their beliefs about giftedness, a view which was not shared by the girls.

For the girls in this study, being identified as gifted made them the targets of confusing and often uncomfortable expectations in their regular classrooms. They perceived that being labeled gifted led to situations in which their competency was more likely to be publicly questioned by teachers and peers, or in which they were more likely to perform poorly (See Table 1).

The girls equated giftedness with capacity, and capacity with *knowing the answer*. They believed that smart students were ones who did well without having to put forth effort. Marie explained it this way: "I do well because I know the answers on tests. Not any other time, because I study [for tests]. I don't always know the answers when he [the teacher] asks you questions about the reading." For these girls, knowing the answer was, in large measure, the meaning of giftedness. For this reason, they frequently expressed concern over possible public disclosure that they did not know the answer, and a fear of peer rejection if they appeared too bright too often. As Joan described it, "People ask you questions and if you don't know the answers, they'll say, 'W-e-l-l! I thought you were in gifted. I thought you knew everything!'"

Lynn: It's difficult! It's really difficult for us! It's more difficult for us than other students because they [teachers] expect us to know more!

Debbie: Especially one teacher! He'll be explaining something and then he'll ask a gifted student a question, but they won't know it. He'll say, "Well, you're supposed to know it. You're in gifted."

TABLE 1: Confusing Attitudes and Expectations Perceived by Gifted Girls

Source	*Sample of Included Terms*
Teachers	" . . . expect too much from me. I can't always be right."
	"Mr. R. [math teacher] gave us calculus in the seventh grade!"
	"They ask you questions and if you don't know they say, 'I thought you were in gifted.'"
	"Some teachers make a big deal out of it when I answer questions."
	"What if I'm called on and I don't know an answer? It makes me look worse."
	" . . . don't like us because we're in gifted and we miss class once a week."
Peers	" . . . embarrass me and point me out when I make a mistake . . . or answer questions."
	"This morning a guy said to me, 'I thought you were in gifted and I'm smarter than you.'" [comment after missing a question in class]
	"They think we're snobs, like we think we're better than everyone else."
	"Even my best friends expect me to know everything!" [comment following participation in an academic team competition]
	"People think you're a *brain*."
	"Sometimes boys like smart girls because they like girls who can do their [boys'] work."

Sally: How are we supposed to know the stuff before we are supposed to? It makes it harder for us. They'll be explaining something and they'll ask an enrichment student a question, but we won't know how to do it. We've never seen it before but they expect us to!

In order to cope with confusing attitudes and expectations, the girls tended to devalue their abilities, even immediately after the researcher observed them perform a task in an exemplary manner as evidenced by teacher praise or the assignment of an A grade. On these occasions the researcher would comment, "You really are smart in science (math, English, etc.)." In response, the gifted girls often corrected the researcher, describing themselves as having potential, but not being different or smarter than other students. "I feel everyone has the same intelligence level. If you try hard and motivate yourself, you can do anything."

Lynn: I try to get good grades because my mom's brought me up right. Some people say, "Look at the brain! She knows all the answers." Some of those people could be just as smart as us if they'd study. They just don't want to take the time.

Researcher: Are you sure studying is the only reason?
Lynn: (Pause) I don't know. I try to be nice to everyone. I don't want to be a brain. I try to have fun.
Researcher: Being a brain means you don't get to have fun?
Lynn: If you're the smart, studious person you go home and study. You don't go to movies and slumber parties.

Miller (1985) found that the performance of students is inhibited when they perceive they are in academic situations that could potentially reveal them as incompetent.

Observations over time indicated that such inhibition did occur in the classroom behavior of the gifted girls. For example, over the course of the study, instances in which girls volunteered to answer questions or make comments during their regular classes decreased. The verbal contributions of gifted boys, however, did not decrease. In addition, on days when students had the option of selecting classroom seats, the girls most often sat near the rear of the room where the possibility of interaction with the teacher was minimized. Girls consciously made these decisions, explaining them to the researcher as attempts to avoid being singled out and called on in class. As Covington has noted, at the root of all classroom behavior is the need for students to protect their sense of self-worth, and in so doing, students use a variety of failure-avoiding strategies to maintain a sense of self-worth. For the girls in this study, the fear of failing to know the answer was especially intense when the subject was one in which they perceived themselves to be most able, when the teacher was one the student especially liked, or when a situation involving direct competition was occurring.

Although this study focused on the perceptions of gifted girls in the middle school, eight gifted boys who were informally interviewed on several occasions provided some evidence to suggest that boys were no less aware of confusing expectations. Boys, however, placed less importance on these expectations: They were less likely to mention concern with teacher or peer approval. Classroom observation over time revealed that the gifted boys were also less likely to modify their behavior when they were reprimanded by teachers for arguing or asking too many questions, or when they were teased by peers about acting too smart. This difference between gifted girls and gifted boys was pointed out to the researcher in numerous unsolicited comments made by the girls. One eighth-grade girl summarized the difference in this way: "I guess girls are a lot more sensitive than boys. If people make fun of boys, they just say, 'you're dumb.' But girls! We take it more personally than they do."

Student-teacher relationships. The girls' beliefs that positive student-teacher relationships lead to higher achievement surfaced frequently in data collection. On numerous occasions they attributed their successes on specific tasks to being liked by the teacher, commenting that, when teachers liked them, they were more likely to do well. The converse also was true. Many of the girls named specific teachers who did not like them, citing the gifted program as the primary reason. Given the same amount of effort expenditure in all subjects, the girls believed it was more difficult to do well in a subject if the teacher did not like a student.

The school's interdisciplinary team organizations were seen as ways for students and teachers to "get closer" so that positive relationships could develop. In fact, sixth-grade girls described their team as a "family," a place where teachers generally wanted you to do well. Team organizations were positive environments for the gifted girls because they felt there was at least one teacher on their team who knew and understood them. This was true for all the girls in this study with the exception of Nancy, a girl who was new to the school and the gifted program. Over the course of the study, Nancy was reprimanded for behavior unacceptable to teachers more often than any of the other gifted girls, although less often than several of the gifted boys. For example, Nancy's continuous failure to show all the steps she used to arrive at her answers in math was viewed by the math teacher as evidence of copying. Nancy was also constantly reprimanded by several of her teachers for misrepresenting the truth when she explained about missing or partially completed assignments. During the five months of data collection, Nancy's behavior grew steadily worse in the eyes of her teachers and resulted in limited interactions with other gifted girls. When the researcher noticed Nancy's growing isolation from her gifted peers, who were previously her close friends, and questioned why, Cindy explained, "She [Nancy] is getting a reputation with teachers."

For the girls in this study, being liked was an important achievement. In their perceptions, students who were liked were given extra chances, their work was displayed more often, and they were allowed to do tasks other students were not. For these reasons, the girls believed that gaining a positive reputation with teachers helped them do well. As one seventh grader explained, "I make a good impression and they'll remember it unless I do something really bad to change it. Then I stop answering questions except once in a while so they still know I'm trying." For this gifted girl, being liked by the teacher was important not only for approval reasons, but because she believed she could "stay on the teacher's good side" even when her participation in class became minimal.

Social Acceptance as Achievement

Whereas it was acceptable to be bright because it made parents proud, being too smart had its social drawbacks. "Friendship is what impresses me most," wrote an eighth grader in her personal journal. "You see someone everyone admires, and you want to be like them." Data collected at the middle school supported the assertions that (a) membership in certain peer groups was considered a meritorious achievement in itself and (b) the values peers placed on specific skills and abilities were used by the girls to formulate their own ability self-perceptions.

Belonging was a critical issue for all the girls. For the eighth-grade girls, its significance was reinforced by the belief that reputations with peers, once gained, had followed them throughout middle school and would continue to follow them to the small community's high school. Connie, one of the most popular of the gifted eighth graders, described the importance of peer group membership and its consequences this way:

> *Connie*: Here we have real set cliques. The best thing you can do is get in the popular crowd. It's no fun if you're in the others. We have three girls' cliques: the sluts, the goodie-goodies, and the main crowd. That's ours . . . You can't be in the main crowd if you're ugly . . . . They [leaders] pick their friends carefully. You have to be pretty and do what they want. Unless you're in the popular crowd guys won't go with you . . . . In order not to be kicked out, you have to follow. If I had guts, I wouldn't hang around them. But if you're out, you're nowhere . . . . I guess the clique teaches you to watch out what you do and who you talk to . . . . People are totally different away from school. I show a lot of this. What I'm telling you now is what I can say when I'm away from school. Then there's not pressure to be cool.

Data from observations revealed that in subtle ways teachers at the middle school influenced the girls' perceptions of social acceptance as a form of achievement. It has been mentioned in the previous section that several gifted boys were frequently observed engaging in classroom behavior that was unacceptable to teachers. This first became apparent during early observations when analysis of the data indicated that teachers using public sarcasm or ridicule often directed it at the same boys, one sixth grader and three seventh graders, all of whom were participants in the gifted program. The open-spaced environment of the team areas made it easy to document the frequent occasions when the boys were publicly reprimanded. The ease of observation was also true for all students and teachers in the team area. For example, on one occasion a teacher at the far end of four classes in the team area was overheard instructing her students, "Raise your hands, but not like

Mr. Burton [a gifted boy] who raises his hand like this [she demonstrates by waving her hand in the air] and yells, 'Miss Martin! Miss Martin!'" When a student sitting near the researcher at the opposite end of the team area was asked how Bobby [Burton] must feel, the student indicated matter-of-factly that Bobby was always in trouble.

The girls believed that gifted boys frequently got in trouble by trying "to show off being smarter than everyone else" and that they were "nerds." Showing off was behavior not acceptable to teachers or peers, and it was, therefore, behavior to be avoided. Arguing with the teacher, thinking you are smarter, and always knowing the answer were other behaviors girls attributed to gifted boys, and were viewed as important reasons the boys were not popular at school (see Table 2). Possible positive aspects of these behaviors, such as defending a point or believing in oneself, did not occur to the girls. Rather, these were behaviors to be avoided if one was to "fit in." To the girls, demonstrating social competence and being accepted were particularly important for gifted students because "outside people think you must be weird if you're in gifted."

Over the course of the study, numerous conversations were recorded in which the girls were asked about the importance of being gifted or talented. Typically, the girls responded by denying ability, "I just try hard. Anyone could do that if they tried," or by framing a specific ability in terms of its perceived social value. If the potential of the ability to result in social prestige was low, the girls tended to devalue the ability. This thought process surfaced without regard to the ability in question: writing skills, algebra, or, as in the following example, music.

Researcher: I hear you are an excellent singer.
Ellen: No. Not really, not excellent.
Researcher: Miss Hunt told me you sing well.
Ellen: When I was in fifth grade I had a lot of nerve. See, I didn't care what people thought of me then, because . . . I don't know. But when I was in fifth grade I sang *Tomorrow* in front of the whole school. And if I had any way of changing it I would, because even if I sang okay, now people think I'm straight.
Researcher: Because of the song?
Ellen: I guess being up there by myself, people think it's weird. The boys think so. I'd rather have friends and things than really be that good . . . 'cause I mean, it doesn't get me a million dollars or anything.

In this middle school, peer groups were important determiners of achievement. Gifted girls frequently placed value on their abilities in terms of the way they believed abilities were valued by others. This interpreting process led to replies like Ellen's "what does it get me?" or, more often, "I just do

TABLE 2: Reasons Gifted Girls Believe Gifted Boys Are Not Popular

Reason	*Sample of Included Terms*
Superior self-perceptions of ability	"[They] think they are smarter than anyone and that they can get away with anything."
	"It's different when people in regular classes think they are better than when [the boys] in gifted do."
Classroom behavior	"They act like people who aren't in gifted don't know anything."
	"They act up in their classes and other people don't like it. Then outside people [regular students] make fun of you for being in gifted."
	"The [gifted] guys like to go ahead and just do things [finish their science books ahead of the class]. We don't. We don't want to be different. They don't care if they are."
	"They are the *real brains*."
Physical appearance	"Most of them [look] odd."
	"They're [eighth-grade gifted boys] the bottom of the barrel. They're really low."
	"Look at them! The way they dress!"
	"I had to run all the way [to class] so I wouldn't be seen with him [seventh-grade gifted boy]."

well because I study," when abilities were perceived as having little social value.

DISCUSSION

In this article, how gifted adolescent girls constructed self-perceptions of ability within their school and community environments has been described. As previously discussed in the results section, the girls' self-perceptions of ability were influenced by several factors including their interpretations of significant others' (parents, teachers, peers, etc.) beliefs and behaviors toward them, and their beliefs about social acceptance.

At the heart of school experiences that affected the gifted girls' sense of worth were student-teacher relationships. In this study, teachers' behaviors toward gifted students were reflective of a lack of understanding about the nature of giftedness and the characteristics of gifted individuals. Teachers who either did not believe in the concept of giftedness or who felt the girls in this study did not participate and perform as gifted students should inadvertently pointed girls out in ways that frequently caused them to feel

incompetent. In addition, management concerns related to a one-day-per-week pull-out gifted program, the content of which was not well known or supported by teachers, contributed to their negative behaviors toward gifted students. In turn, gifted girls were more likely to express higher subject-specific self-perceptions of ability and were observed to more actively participate in classrooms where student-teacher relationships were characterized as close. These findings indicate (a) a critical need to provide adequate in-service education to all teachers in districts with gifted programs, and (b) the importance of assisting teachers in the development of instructional techniques that stress process over knowing the answer, and that promote students' positive ability perceptions through an emphasis on strengths as well as remediation of weaknesses.

The girls' perceptions that gifted boys were less aware of and less concerned about teachers' and peers' expectations are especially interesting in light of studies that indicate girls are more sensitive than boys are to changes in the school environment (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Rubenfeld & Schumer, 1986; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Simmons, Blyth, Van Cleave, & Bush, 1979) and in the curriculum (Davies, 1978). It is possible that heightened sensitivity to the environment may partially account for the girls' desires to please their teachers and parents, and to be considered socially competent by peers. They cared a great deal about pleasing others because they were more attuned to others' perceptions. More importantly, the present study indicates that interpretations of significant others' beliefs and behaviors may have profound consequences for gifted girls, suggesting one possible reason why fewer talented women achieve their adult potential in comparison to men (Callahan 1981).

Early adolescence is a particularly important time in the development of self-perceptions of ability, because it is a time when students' understanding of the meaning of ability changes (Miller, 1985; Nicholls, 1986; Nicholls & Miller, 1984). The research conducted by Nicholls and Miller support the findings from the present study of gifted girls. Girls conceptualized ability as knowing the answer and believed that the label of giftedness implied this rigid interpretation of ability to teachers and peers. Further, they saw themselves as frequently being placed in situations in which they did not know the answer, and therefore, were looked down on by teachers and peers. These situations inhibited girls' performance and contributed to their beliefs that they were not smart, but had only potential. This distinction offered girls a safe explanation for not always knowing the expected answer, while, at the same time, it created the acceptable role of someone-who-tries in place of the socially unacceptable role of someone-who-knows, "the brain."

Conceptualizing ability, and particularly giftedness, as always knowing the answer was debilitating for the girls. They were observed to behave in ways calculated to minimize verbal, public interaction in order to avoid failure and maintain a sense of worthiness (Covington, 1984; Covington & Omelich, 1979). Rather than risk speaking out, arguing points of view, or moving ahead in their class work as did gifted boys, the girls in this study focused on finding the answer acceptable to teachers, and not appearing too smart to peers. Their plight, not unlike that of other adolescent females facing issues of achievement, social acceptance and gender identity (Cook, 1976; Fox, 1978; Hill & Lynch, 1983; Horner, 1972; Lavach & Lanier, 1975), was made more poignant by their identification as gifted. As females, they believed that social acceptance was important in itself (Hill & Lynch, 1983), and that being liked and accepted contributed to greater achievements. As gifted students, they were expected by teachers to "strive for perfection" (Kramer, 1987). As young adolescents, they did not see ways they could achieve both.

Although this study of 10 girls in one middle school is limited in generalizability, the rich descriptions of how girls came to interpret their own abilities may enable teachers in similar settings to examine their own teaching behaviors and beliefs about giftedness in order to improve the instructional climate. As Bolster (1983) noted, the detailed pictures of classroom reality provided by interpretive, ethnographic research is often more easily understood and accepted by practitioners. However, additional studies of young adolescent girls participating in gifted programs should be conducted and compared to provide insight into the formation of gifted girls' ability perceptions across various sites.

In conclusion, the goal of this study was to understand how the gifted girls in one middle school constructed self-perceptions of ability, and how those perceptions were used to make decisions about achievement-related behavior. The findings from this study may be helpful to educators interested in the effects of identifying young adolescents as gifted, particularly as they relate to students' self-estimates of ability. Thornburg (1985a) has concluded that, "Early adolescents are growing up faster . . . . Their [sense of] self-worth seems more fragile" (p. 23). The findings from the present study indicate that this is particularly true for today's young adolescent girls. Although positive beliefs about ability are no more important for gifted girls than for other young adolescents, research has shown that these students may be at risk in the formation of positive ability perceptions (Reis, 1987; Shakeshaft & Palmieri, 1978). Self-perceptions that lead gifted girls to devalue their abilities may limit their future aspirations, and, as a result, decrease the contributions of a significant group in our society.

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