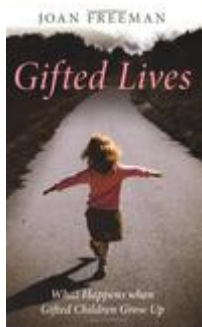


Various Paths, Common Themes

A review of



Gifted Lives: What Happens When Gifted Children Grow Up

by Joan Freeman

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Reviewed by

[David Yun Dai](#)

Gifted Lives: What Happens When Gifted Children Grow Up follows the lives of 20 individuals who were identified in their childhood as gifted by IQ and other measures, and were followed up by the author for several decades into their 30s and 40s.

Living Forward and Looking Backward

The main underlying logic that drove the author's investigation seems to be the following: If life is an experiment by God's design, what would it look like for those who were fortunately (or unfortunately) endowed with exuberant gifts (e.g., high intelligence and talent), who happened to be born into certain kinds of families with certain kinds of parents,

and who happened to live in a certain social–historical milieu with its unique structure of opportunities and challenges? Would “gifted” lives be happy ones? Would their high intelligence be properly channeled and utilized to the benefit of these individuals? Would these gifts get them in trouble—with others or with themselves? Although there are myriad ways that the permutations and combinations can play out, the patterns and consequences are discernable, or so the author of the book believes.

The life stories of the gifted individuals told in the book are based on tenacious, laudable efforts by Freeman to follow up on these individuals’ personal journeys. Indeed it became an intellectual journey of the author’s own, as she undertook interviewing them at various junctures of their lives, to develop deep, sympathetic understanding of what they went through in the peaks and valleys of these young lives, to identify distinct life events and themes, major factors and deep causes underlying their life decisions, triumphs, and setbacks, and to reflect on major psychological theories and educational interventions in light of these life stories. The author uses Kierkegaard’s remarks as an epigraph: “Life must be lived forward but can only be understood backward” (p. ix). It is a methodological note that is reiterated many times throughout the book: Only by observing a life fully unfolded can we see the significance and consequences of early events and experiences.

Various Pathways and Invariant Themes

Each individual is unique in terms of environments and biological constitution. Therefore, research that starts with particulars rather than universals, cases rather than “variables,” phenomenological accounts (subjective or lived experiences reported by participants) rather than predictive equations, has its distinct strengths in tapping into a more nuanced, complex reality, instead of reducing individuals to puppets with some abstract, simplified independent variables pulling the string. For example, the author spares no ink describing how Jocelyn’s small-town accent affected social reactions in London and how the subtle and conspicuous differences of growing up in a small town and then moving to a big metropolitan city influenced her self-image and self-identity. All these local conditions would likely fade into obscurity if it were not for an idiographic approach.

If the author just depicts diverse trajectories and pathways of the gifted individuals without finding some common threads, we would still be in the dark as to what regularities can be found in these stories and what lessons can be drawn. A central question seems to be this: After years of explorations and efforts, do they find their passions, niches, even callings, and do they live healthy, happy, productive lives? What are contributing or hindering factors for their success and happiness?

Some common threads seem to weave together diverse life stories: unconditional love and acceptance, timely exposure and experiences, pursuing something that is truly

intrinsically rewarding rather than merely to meet others' expectations, a solid sense of self and purpose, personal resourcefulness, and the tenacity to follow through; or, conversely, overdemanding parents, psychological insecurity, inappropriate educational provisions and pacing, other-directed perfectionism, the lack of ego strength and self-confidence. Obviously there are many other themes and issues that can be identified in the richness of these cases, and so forth. The author has her own biases, and she clearly highlights some as more important than others. But the richness of the narratives and of the quoted first-person accounts is sufficient for readers to draw their own conclusions.

A narrative provides rich contexts—time, place, people, events—in which major life events, transitions, turning points, and impediments are unfolded and understood as such. This form of representation raises new issues, not the least is how to make decisions about the significance and importance of a particular event or subjective account in the midst of numerous details and reports. Any researcher using such qualitative or ideographic approaches to studying longitudinal patterns would face the challenge of sifting through hundreds of pages of transcription in a kind of data mining to find meaningful patterns and distill some storylines. This takes extraordinary skills and insights to do, and artistry to present. In essence, trustworthiness (reliability) and truthfulness (validity) are on the line.

Explanation and Interpretation

Interpretation plays a major role in the inductive process, as the “career gifted” Gail illustrates. Several observations can be made that are relatively objective or “factual”: Gail decided to go to a small college instead of a major university, Gail claimed she did not (bother to) work hard at all since the work in school and college was too easy or too boring. Summarizing the patterns of Gail’s behaviors across situations and over time, the author concludes that Gail developed a defense mechanism to ward off any work or challenge that would threat her self-image as “gifted.”

This assertion, though evidence based, is an interpretation or theorizing about what makes Gail tick. The author further asserts that being labeled *gifted* early on in Gail’s life was in an important way responsible for the development of such a defense mechanism. This is a causal inference or attribution; there is no way in such case studies to determine whether the defense mechanism Gail developed was indeed a result of being labeled *gifted* or something else.

This kind of ambiguity is inevitable in causal explanations that are built on interpretations of psychosocial events. Freud is criticized for that, but there is no other way around, and surely experimental manipulation or brain imaging would not perform miracles in solving the psychological puzzle. However, the case method does add to the burden of proof that a given causal explanation is the most plausible of the alternatives (e.g., it was not

labeling per se but Gail's fragile ego strength that led to this defense mechanism). The author is careful in comparing several cases to show that being labeled *gifted*, though negative in general, has differential effects—more detrimental to some than to others.

Any claim that involves interpretations of the inner world of a person is not falsifiable, as the inner life has a locked-in, subjective quality, and one can always construct alternative interpretations and explanations. Unfortunately, psychological researchers have to live with this reality, or even further, to adopt a more postpositivist perspective that views evidence as always tinted by some sort of interpretation (e.g., subjective meanings of an event to the person).

Some psychological researchers may dismiss idiographic methods as “soft” and retreat to more comfortable paradigms where meanings are crystal clear or there is no need to delve into the complexities of the inner life. Freeman is not only courageous in this regard but also skillful in weaving facts, life events, and personal accounts together in a manner showing discernable and meaningful life trajectories and pathways of these individuals: They are “gifted” in a very human way, with strengths and vulnerabilities, triumphs and setbacks.

What Is and What Could Be

According to Aristotle, history is about what happened, and poetry (fiction) is about what could happen. When Freeman writes about the twists and turns of the life stories of the gifted individuals, what looms large is the question “What if?” What if Margaret had loving parents? What if Gail lived in an upper middle-class family? What if Adrian grew up in a healthy, normal home environment? What if Lydia and Francene were born male, rendering gender stereotypes innocuous to them? What could be done to make their lives better and more fulfilling is a question lurking underneath.

In this way of writing, Freeman is wearing two hats: She is an academic psychologist, trying to tell what happened socially and psychologically as truthfully as possible; yet she is a professional psychologist at the same time, trying to understand where problems originate and where things could be or could have been different. Indeed, a main concern of the author is how growing up “gifted” may create endogenous and exogenous barriers to the happiness the gifted individuals are seeking. Endogenously, high sensitivity and a more nuanced, deep sense of reality may not be always conducive to a sense of contentment and happiness. Exogenously, gifted individuals may induce resentment and other negative reactions or overly high expectations, which may be detrimental to their social life and self-perceptions.

The author takes issue with some popular ideas and theories, such as the viability of grade skipping and labeling, arguing that they might create barriers rather than opportunities for the gifted. In this regard, the book is thought provoking and meant to challenge the

reader to think rather than provide definitive answers to unresolved questions. All professional psychologists and educators alike are looking for ways to improve human conditions. In that sense, they are all in a way seeking the “poetic truth”: What is possible and can things be different? This is what this reader understands as the initial impetus of the case studies.
