
Chapter 10

Work, Relationships, and Balance in the Lives of Gifted Women

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Gifted women. The label conjures up diverse images: an assortment of accomplished scientists, politicians, and feminist activists on the one hand, and a range of undiscovered artists, reclusive academics, underemployed reentry women, and ambivalent teenage math students on the other. Our images sometimes are supported by the stories of celebrated women, women whose autobiographies or poems or essays have given us glimpses into the struggles and achievements that have accompanied personal or professional growth. More often, however, we read that most gifted women are underachievers struggling to find genuine outlets for their interests and abilities, impeded by personal and societal barriers to success. Recently, Noble (1987) speculated that: "By adulthood it is likely that the majority of gifted women...settle for far less than their full potential" (p. 368).

Social pressures, cultural expectations, and negative self-concepts all appear to work against gifted women's confidence, achievement, and visibility in the work force (Noble, 1987). Psychological interpersonal vulnerabilities have been identified as significant inhibitors to the full development of gifted women's competence (Hollinger & Fleming, 1984; Kerr, 1985; Reis, 1987; Schwartz, 1980). Despite the conventional expectations that intellectually talented girls will have an "edge" on coping with the demands of the academic world and that gifted college graduates will have a head start on career pursuits, there is little empirical evidence that giftedness is the critical variable in the success or well-being of educated women (Reis, 1987).

Curiously, in recent efforts to document and explain the accomplishments and concerns of gifted women, only rarely have these women been asked to describe their life experiences, their work, their relationships, or the significance of "giftedness" in their personal or professional development. We have not determined whether the lives of gifted women are notably different from those of their nongifted midlife peers, or whether during adulthood gifted women have felt affirmed or burdened by their intellectual strengths. Moreover, much of our conceptualization of the gifted has been framed by studies of earlier cohorts, such as the Terman group (Terman, 1925; Terman & Oden, 1947, 1959) that was born around 1910 or the Ginzberg (1966) and Birnbaum (1975) groups that were born during the Depression years. As Bardwick (1980) pointed out, when we seek to evaluate the adult experience of women, we cannot ignore the sociohistorical context of their personal and career growth. To date, little research has been conducted on gifted women who were raised with "traditional" values and whose education predated the women's movement; relatively little is known about that cohort that entered adulthood concurrent with the resurgence of feminism in the 1960s, and arrived at midlife when professional opportunities for bright women had become more widely available. During the past decade, the experience of talented women in a variety of careers has been documented (Abramson & Franklin, 1986; Gallese, 1985; Morantz, Pomerlau, & Fenichel, 1982; O'Connell & Russo, 1983; Sternburg, 1980) but cross-sections of midlife gifted women have received limited attention.

In order to address the lack of information about the personal and phenomenological experience of gifted women, I recently conducted a longitudinal follow-up study of gifted women who had first been studied in the late 1950s. This study provided an opportunity for a close, detailed examination of the adult development of a group of gifted women now at midlife. Quantitative and qualitative data from 35 women were used to assess how women identified as gifted in the 1950s have experienced giftedness and competence in the personal and interpersonal domains of their lives. In addition, analyses of extensive interview data provided new insight to "the experience and meaning of work" for gifted women.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON GIFTED WOMEN

This investigation was informed by earlier studies of gifted women. As previously stated, the seminal research on gifted women was conducted at a time when educated women typically did not seek to enter fully or compete in the work force. Of the 671 gifted girls studied by Terman, only 253 were

working full time at midlife; among the married women in his study, fewer than one third worked full time (Terman & Oden, 1959). In 1968, Terman's associate, Melita Oden, compared the gifted women to their male counterparts and concluded that, "On the whole, the gifted women have not shown marked interest in, or ambition for, a high degree of vocational achievement outside the home" (Oden, 1968, p. 25).

Later studies of gifted women (Birnbaum, 1975; Faunce, 1967; Ginzberg, 1966; Helson, 1967; Yohalem, 1979) revealed that, during the post-World War II years, gifted women tended to be persistent in their efforts to utilize their intellectual or creative talents, despite inequitable pay in the labor market and inhospitable social milieux that discouraged career-plus-family lifestyles. Birnbaum (1975) reported that the most satisfied gifted women were married professionals who viewed themselves as both "unconventional" and "dependent." Birnbaum concluded that, for gifted women of the 1940s and 1950s, career and personal gratification rested heavily on the willingness of the individual to "buck the tide" and be an independent thinker; at the same time, life satisfaction was correlated with the availability of a supportive spouse on whom the gifted professional woman could rely for emotional reinforcement.

During the past decade, Birnbaum's findings about gifted women have been echoed in studies of gifted girls who have been compared to their female nongifted peers; typically gifted girls have been described as follows:

From an early age gifted girls appear to be more achievement-oriented, more interested in non-traditional professions, more rebellious against sex-role stereotyping, and more rejecting of outside influences that hinder their development. (Noble, 1987, p. 371)

Despite this general profile of gifted girls and despite the increased education of women and the broader involvement of talented women in the work force, recent reports (Kerr, 1985; Reis, 1987) have documented that gifted women still hesitate to seek careers in traditionally male-dominated fields, do not advance in most career fields as rapidly as male counterparts, and do not feel particularly adequate in their pursuit of multiple roles in adult life. In this sense, Reis (1987) has suggested that although, as children, gifted girls may look academically and socially dissimilar to their nongifted peers, their giftedness likely will be gauged by career-related standards in later life and they ultimately may not seem so different from other women of their age cohort.

The issues of *social awkwardness* and *problems with social efficacy* have begun to emerge as major concerns of gifted females. Kerr (1985) and Reis (1987) identified diverse emotional constraints such as conflicts about

femininity, ambivalence about success, perfectionism, "imposter" concerns, and unrealistic planning, that may have long-term consequences for gifted women. Hollinger and Fleming (1984) reported a high incidence of low social competence among gifted female adolescents. Rodenstein, Pflieger, and Colangelo (1977) and Noble (1987) articulated the mixed societal messages that likely confound gifted women in their pursuit of the "multipotentialed" life. Noble (1987) concluded that during adulthood gifted women may be especially vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy and conflict. Burdened with their own high standards and the expectations of the society around them, these women may feel inordinately pressured to be superwomen, to put their intellectual competencies at the center of their lives, and to neglect the need for "balance" that has been identified as a central issue in the adult well-being of women (Baruch, Barnett, & Rivers, 1983). For women generally, the achievement of balance requires an ongoing calibration—a fine-tuning of how energies are distributed, how relationships are sustained, and how choices are made. The existing literature on gifted women suggests that for this group—women who may bear the scars of long-term social vulnerability as well as the burdens of high self-demands—the achievement of balance in adult life may remain distressingly "out of reach."

THE GIFTED FOLLOW-UP STUDY

In 1957, 41 women who entered the University of California, Los Angeles, as freshmen were selected for participation in a new program for students who had been identified as "gifted." These students ranked in the top 10% on a battery of national scholastic aptitude examinations and constituted approximately the top 5% of UCLA's incoming class. When tested as freshmen, they demonstrated significantly higher ego strength, greater appreciation for theoretical and aesthetic issues, and greater interest in nontraditional occupations than their nongifted peers. While attending UCLA, the gifted women were offered special counseling designed to encourage the full expression of their interests and abilities. Their undergraduate experience was reported by Langland (1961), and data about these students' academic performance, aptitudes, and values were stored for later analysis.

In 1984–1985, I located 38 of the 1957 group of UCLA gifted women (Schuster, 1986). Thirty-five women, constituting 85% of the entire cohort, agreed to participate in the Gifted Follow-up Study and to provide, via questionnaires and interviews, detailed information about their background, their adult development, and their attitudes about such issues as work, competence, giftedness, relationships, and balance at midlife.

In light of the literature on gifted women that has pointed to the absence of longitudinal and phenomenological data on this population, my investigation was designed to obtain in-depth information about these women's lives. Accordingly, several questions were posed at the outset:

1. Who were these women? What was their background? What was their undergraduate experience like? What characterized their adult lives? And what were they "doing" now?
2. What could these women tell us about the experience of giftedness over the life cycle? Was giftedness important to them? Had it been a source of conflict in childhood, adolescence, or adulthood?
3. What had been the social experience of these women? Had giftedness affected their sense of social acceptability or social efficacy? Had they felt socially inhibited as a result of their superior abilities? How would they describe their relationships in adulthood?
4. What characterized the work lives of these gifted women? What kinds of careers had they pursued and what had mattered to them in their work endeavors?
5. What did these women have to say about "balance" at midlife?

The findings provided a broad overview of the lives of 35 gifted women at midlife and also raised some important questions about the needs and concerns of gifted women today.

Group Characteristics

The following group profile was drawn from questionnaires that the UCLA gifted women completed in 1984 (mean age: 45) prior to participating in personal interviews. The women came from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, but nearly three quarters grew up in white, middle-class, stable families in which the fathers were fully employed and the mothers were homemakers. Of the 35 women, 32 were first-born or only children.

The women's descriptions of themselves as children were differentiated into three categories: a "shy" group (63%) who described themselves as having been quiet, obedient, "good" girls; an "outgoing" group (31%) who recalled having been gregarious, popular, and generally happy leaders during their school years; and a "socially uncomfortable" group (6%) who remembered themselves as anxious, insecure, or overly aggressive during childhood.

On the whole, the gifted women reported that they fared very well academically throughout their school years. None attended high schools that had special programs for gifted students. Although the majority knew

from parents and teachers that they were intellectually talented, few recalled having received specific encouragement to plan for professional careers or to pursue rigorous academic programs.

Of the 35 women, 33 earned BA degrees (28 from UCLA). As undergraduates, 45% chose nontraditional majors in the sciences, mathematics, or business. Of the women, 60% earned advanced degrees, including six doctorates, five law degrees, and one medical degree.

Over half of the gifted women worked throughout adult life. In 1984, 83% were involved in professional work at least half time. Listed in Table 10.1 are the diverse career activities in which the UCLA gifted women were engaged at midlife.

Three quarters of the women were married within 3 years of college graduation, and in 1984 more than half had been married for 19 or more years. Of 14 women who divorced, 5 had remarried by midlife. One woman had not married.

Of these women, 80% had children, most during their 20s. At midlife only 11% of these women had children still in elementary school, and most were about to "empty the nest."

When surveyed in 1984, most of the gifted women were involved in both work and community activities. When asked about the impact of the major social or political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, only a handful indicated any longstanding interest, involvement or activism. As a group, these women described themselves as relatively conservative in terms of current lifestyle, but "unconventional" relative to the values with which they had been raised. While the married women more often than not rated themselves as dependent on their husbands for emotional support, none of the women viewed themselves as dependent in terms of earning potential or the capacity for self-sufficiency.

Overall, the women rated themselves as being in good-to-excellent physical, emotional, and spiritual health. The majority indicated that they felt they had lived up to their intellectual potential and rated themselves as relatively high in life satisfaction. The least satisfied women were those who were unemployed or underemployed, with divorced women demonstrating lower satisfaction than married women.

The Meaning of Giftedness in the Lives of Gifted Women

One of my objectives in studying gifted women was to find out what they had to say about giftedness. How did they experience their own giftedness? What was the impact on their development of having been told they were gifted?

In the interviews, I asked the women to elaborate on their "experience of being bright, gifted, intellectually able during childhood and adolescence"

TABLE 10.1
Current Activities of Gifted Follow-Up Study Women

<i>Field</i>	<i>Position/Activity</i>	<i>n=35</i>
Education	Secondary school teaching	4
	Community college teaching	2
	College teaching	2
	University administration	1
Social sciences	Community leader /organizer	2
	Social service administration	1
	Social science research	1
	Clinical psychologist	1
Science/engineering	Applied math research	1
	Scientific research	1
Medicine	Physician	1
	Nurse	1
	Medical technology	1
Business/government	Certified Public Accountant	2
	Management consultant	1
	Government administrator	1
	Home-based crafts manufacturer	1
	Administrative assistant	1
Law	Attorney	2
	Legal consultant	1
Art/music/literature	Artist	1
	Art collector/gallery owner	1
	Assistant film producer	1
	Piano teacher	1
	Writer/journalist	1
Religion	Minister	1
Homemaking	Homemaker	1

and to speculate about the overall impact of having been identified as gifted during their formative years. Fifteen of the women (43%) described the experience of giftedness in positive terms. For example, one woman stated:

Giftedness was positive. School was easy. My best friend was more gifted than I....My teachers encouraged me. I remember a high school philosophy teacher who told me I had an original mind.

Another commented:

Being bright made it easier in school. I never had to struggle like others did....I chose the smartest friends and always had a core group. My teachers would try to bring me out, teasing, "We know you're shy."

And a third said:

I always knew I was smart in some areas. And I had a lot of reinforcement from my parents. I could memorize things, do recitations; I knew that others my age were not doing these things. I had a long interest span. I knew I was different. I didn't know many others who liked to be quiet, who had more fun being quiet. When we moved from the city to the affluent suburbs in junior high, it was the first time of being with lots of people who were smarter than I was. I met a girl the first day of school who said, "You are not one of the silly people." I always had a lot of close friends who were very bright.

The "positive" women generally mentioned having found a peer group of friends at least as bright as themselves. They indicated that they always had taken being bright for granted. They described giftedness as the ability to learn and perform quickly.

For the majority of the gifted women, however, feelings about giftedness were less sanguine. Reflecting on their childhood and adolescent experiences, 20 (57%) of the women recalled situations in which they felt ignored, discounted, embarrassed, or downright discouraged about their intellectual talents. In this group, few women felt that their apparent abilities had been prized by their families or their teachers, and many felt a lack of peer-group affirmation or support. Giftedness was, as one woman put it,

no big deal. It functioned for me in high school, because I was socially insecure. I expected to get good grades. The teachers took it for granted. I knew what I wanted [to work in a medical field]....There was no intellectual environment at home. I was able to know what the teachers expected. I was able to concentrate, I was a fast learner; but once the test was over, I'd forget it all.

Another observed:

Prior to going to UCLA, I hadn't thought much about my having any gifted abilities. It was not a big factor in my life. I did the same normal things as everybody else. Perhaps if my parents had been smarter....I was thought of as a dependable person who'd do no wrong. I missed an important part of growing up; I was never turbulent; I was too responsible.

A third stated:

I felt like I was an outsider in my family. I was different from them. I remember at age six, I wanted to be an expert in some area. I felt apart from my family,

from the people they associated with. I was bookish. My mother would say, "Go out and play, get more exercise"....I wish I had gotten personal, private strokes...between fifth grade and ninth grade I wasted so much time, I was so bored, I was treading water.

For these women, giftedness was alienating. During critical developmental years their intellectual identities lacked mooring or nurturance. Some of these women also expressed a general disregard for the concept of giftedness. For example, a woman who had earned a doctorate in the social sciences and now worked for a major university stated:

I didn't like UCLA's gifted label. Giftedness was the artifact of a test. This had happened to me in grade school too. I'm verbal, not gifted. I don't have any special talent....Teachers always told me that I wasn't living up to my potential, and I believed them, but I never took my intellect seriously. Doing that would have meant I could see myself as capable of "x" and thus would do "y." I never saw myself that way. I simply assumed I would earn a living—get by in life not using my hands.

This same woman mentioned that her mother had always told her that "it didn't do any good to be bright" and that it was too bad that the daughter was not "a nicer person." Similar sentiments were expressed by another academic who recalled her experience of giftedness with considerable contempt:

Shit! It was very uncomfortable. I had lots of negative reinforcement. I didn't think I was that bright. I always said the wrong things. I wasn't good in school. People always thought my [younger] brother was brighter. My mother would say, "What good are brains with that sarcastic mouth?" My Iowa test scores gave me the first clue, but...I used to lie about the scores, just like I'd cut out the cashmere labels from my sweaters. I was uncomfortable with it. I wanted boys to like me. Being bright wasn't something I thought was neat. I didn't know any bright women....I experienced myself as weird, not popular, loud, not brilliant. All I wanted to do was go to parties. I didn't expect to go to college. My peers were not intellectuals. I just wanted to be accepted.

The women for whom giftedness was essentially negative in adolescence did not, as a group, assert that being labeled as gifted had been detrimental during college or adulthood. In terms of long-term effects, both the positive and the negative groups concluded that the overall impact of the gifted label itself had been either insignificant or neutral. For the "positive" women, especially those who had always taken their intellect seriously, being told they were gifted was just one more affirmation of something they valued in themselves. Some of these women said that they had found the

gifted label "comforting" or "reassuring," and the majority indicated that being selected for UCLA's Gifted Student Program had provided an extra boost to their self-image. Ultimately, however, these women found that actual work productivity and achievement were the most important contributors to their positive self-esteem.

For the women who had felt more "negative" about giftedness during adolescence, the discomfort of the gifted identity seemed to abate as they separated from their families or moved toward careers that utilized their interests and abilities. Selection for the Gifted Student Program was especially beneficial to a number of "negative" women who sought academic and personal counseling from the program staff; several women recalled specific statements made to them by a female counselor who encouraged them to value their talents and expand their professional goals. For the more negative women, participation in the program appeared to help undo the stigma of "difference" suffered in earlier years. A few of these women indicated that, as adults, the gifted label still caused them to feel pressured to "prove" themselves or "do more," but the great majority simply were happy to be in careers that allowed them to use their minds and feel effective professionally.

The Social Experience of Gifted Women

As the recent literature on the needs of gifted women has pointed out, the social and interpersonal experience of this population can be fraught with ambivalence, embarrassment, and self-consciousness. For the UCLA gifted women, feelings of social ease and efficacy did not come automatically. As noted earlier, about two thirds of these women reported that they had felt shy or socially uncomfortable as children. From questionnaire self-ratings, it appeared that there was a significant relationship between childhood social vulnerability and adult feelings of social discomfort ($X^2 = 4.08$, $df = 1$, $p .05$).

In my interviews with the UCLA gifted women I sought to probe more deeply those social circumstances that they described as problematic at home, in school settings, at work, and in close interpersonal relationships over the life cycle. In our discussions of the high school experience, I found that even some of the women who had described giftedness in positive terms recalled having been subjected to a certain amount of social rejection by high school classmates. These women attended high school at a time when most bright girls were stigmatized for their academic accomplishments. As one woman recalled:

I was good in math in high school, was at the top of the class in algebra and geometry. As a senior, all of a sudden, the boys got better. I didn't want to com-

pete with the men; I wasn't about to go in and stand up for my rights in math class. It wasn't cool to outshine a man. I lost my confidence, thought they were smarter than I was.

Another woman mentioned that she had been "among the top four or five people" in her high school but had "had no real friends." A third woman said: "I had to hide my smartness to be lovable," and then quoted the familiar Dorothy Parker line, "Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses." The "hiding" theme was repeated by a woman who described her giftedness as "a secret between my teachers and me." Another recalled having had "two sets of friends"—those who knew her in academically oriented classes and those with whom she partied. Another said that her talents intimidated her peers and consequently she "played dumb, never showed my grades to anyone, and denied my intellect."

The social vulnerability experienced by the UCLA gifted women during high school was seldom mitigated by the interventions of teachers or counselors. Only eight of the women even mentioned having been explicitly encouraged by school personnel; most felt they had been ignored. A shift in social context occurred for many, however, with entry to college and selection for the Gifted Student Program. An administrator described the shift she experienced moving from high school to the university:

In high school, the teachers never really paid any attention to my abilities. I expected myself to do well...but I didn't feel unique, I took it for granted. I had figured out what it took to "be smart," but a lot of others had caught on to that too. College was a turning point, though. I'll never forget how surprised I was to find out in college that everybody in the room was thinking that it was o.k. You didn't have to be cool about it, to be a thinker.

In a similar vein, an attorney said:

I got one B all the time I was in high school. I was in the fast track. Then I flunked my first college midterm and was stunned. I learned from that professor how to analyze things—which was very tough—but I loved the notion that there were things to teach me.

For many of the gifted women, the UCLA environment provided both social acceptance and intellectual challenge. They discovered that their giftedness was not an interpersonal handicap and most developed successful social lives.

During the interviews, I asked the gifted women whether they had experienced any social alienation during adult life. Had being gifted, or intellectually competent, caused them any interpersonal conflicts in adulthood?

Had they found that “competence” and “close interpersonal attachments” could co-exist?

As a group, these women indicated that as adults they indeed had found ways to assert themselves and their abilities without threatening or jeopardizing their connections with other people. A number of the women mentioned that they had found it helpful to surround themselves with other competent people, especially with other women with whom they shared a sense of intellectual equality. As one put it:

My women friends are competent themselves. Some have less feelings of competence than they should, but it's voiced and we can encourage one another. And others need to be sat on. We all teach each other.

By tending to limit their adult social groups to like-minded peers, the gifted women generally found they were able to avoid social conflict due to giftedness. A few of the women did mention experiences in which they had found that their abilities threatened others, but they also mentioned having taken deliberate steps to appear less imposing; one observed that

I don't use my competence against others, don't make others feel smaller. I try to make them feel better.

Another woman also mentioned making others comfortable:

I can think of a couple of examples where relationships came to an end because another woman saw me as superwoman. Not that I was. It was their impression. I don't now always let my competency come out to the full degree. I have been hurt by a close friend feeling inadequate due to my teaching, my managing several roles. I set my abilities aside except with other teachers. I put my competency in the background so that the relationship is not affected. I hid my smarts in high school. At UCLA, I wanted to put smartness behind me, be care-free. I have the same role now: it's become a habit, trying to make others comfortable—not to be uncomfortable due to my ability to do things.

From the interviews, it appeared that many of the women had spent their late teens and early 20s overcoming earlier problems with social inhibition; during their adult years they had focused more on the development of competence and the achievement of emotional independence. The process of integrating competence and relationships had not always gone smoothly. A clinician commented:

I used to believe that I was incomplete and the only way to be liked was to remain incompetent. I believed if I were competent and able, then my relation-

ships would crumble. But they didn't. And my partner has encouraged me to be competent. As I become more competent, I am more "myself."

Another woman indicated that she was still seeking ways to combine the work and intimacy aspects of her life:

I don't think I am [competent] yet. I'm just now exploring relationships in a new way....Rather than seek my career to the exclusion of relationships, I'm seeing that these two things go hand in hand....Relationships require my believing I am worthy of it, choosing someone who is my equal.

Overall, however, the majority of the women had moved from feelings of social discomfort with their intellectual abilities in high school to a more integrated, comfortable outlook at midlife. As they grew into their adult identities, their competence proved beneficial. As they sustained adult relationships, they felt more accepted. As they separated themselves from nonsupportive environments, they found healthy sources of affirmation and support. They saw positive changes in themselves and their surroundings. As a "new" professional observed?

Things have gotten a lot better. I've changed the people I'm close to. My relationship with my husband is evolving. As I've changed, I have sought out different kinds of people—people who are very involved, doing things, making it. I used to have incredibly close relationships with mothers of young children. I don't have that kind of time now. I seek people who don't *need* to see me. And I find that men like me better now too, find me more attractive. I've moved to a different place.

Work in the Lives of Gifted Women

In addition to exploring themes about giftedness and competence, I asked the UCLA gifted women about the "experience and meaning of work" in their lives. Because as freshmen these women had demonstrated unusually high ego strength, strong theoretical and aesthetic interests, and preferences for nontraditional fields, I wondered whether they were pursuing careers that tapped their superior intellectual abilities and whether they were heavily career-oriented at midlife. At the same time, because these women had been reared in the 1940s and 1950s when women were expected to devote themselves primarily to family roles, I also wondered how they coped with multiple roles—whether they felt they had successfully integrated both work and intimate relationships.

When surveyed in 1984, the UCLA gifted women provided strong evidence of positive experiences both in the work force and in their personal lives. The majority of the women had worked outside the home throughout

their adult lives, and at midlife only three women were not employed in at least some capacity. The criteria used to determine these women's employment history patterns (Table 10.2) were adapted from Ginzberg (1966); from the aggregate data about the women's work lives, several interesting patterns were identified.

First, the number of completed degrees and advanced degrees was unusually high for women who entered undergraduate programs in the late 1950s. The only women in the UCLA gifted group who did not complete bachelor's degrees were a woman who had been a re-entry student in 1957 and then had to drop out due to financial pressures, and a woman who had gotten married during her junior year and had become pregnant shortly thereafter. Both of these women had worked intermittently during adult life and had not felt handicapped by the lack of a bachelor's degree. In terms of advanced degrees, 60% of the women who had earned BAs went on for additional education. For women of this cohort, the proportion who earned advanced degrees—many of them in nontraditional fields such as chemistry, anthropology, medicine, and law—was remarkably high.

Second, nearly all of the women were involved in careers that, by the standards of the era in which they were raised, were "nontraditional." Of the 35 women, only 1 had become a nurse and only 1 worked in an essentially clerical role. None taught at the elementary school level. The piano

TABLE 10.2
Career Histories of 35 Gifted Follow-Up Study Women*

	%
<i>Continuous</i> (has held full-time jobs throughout adult life)	31
<i>Minor breaks</i> (has worked full time, but has interrupted her career for short intervals during which she may have worked part time)	23
<i>Intermittent</i> (has spent three or more short periods away from work, has worked part time only, or has re-entered school or the work force, and continues full time)	26
<i>Periodic</i> (has dropped out of full-time work one or more times, and each time for 3 or more years, now works part time)	11
<i>Terminated</i> , temporarily or permanently (has left the labor market after a substantial period of work and has not yet returned to work)	6
<i>Minor or none</i> (has had less than 4 years in the labor force or has had no work experience at all)	3

* modified version of Ginzberg (1966)

teacher had received a law degree but preferred to teach adults and to pursue extensive musical interests. The range of career fields reflects both the diverse interests of the group and the expanding employment opportunities for women during the past 25 years.

Third, as a group, these women tended to be relatively high achievers, even if they had started careers after their child-rearing years. At midlife, 64% of the group provided evidence that they were utilizing their education and professional training and were earning more than the median income for American women of their age group (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984). In addition, several women who had recently begun professional employment anticipated making major career and salary gains within the next several years. Only five women (14%) appeared to be on an ongoing "low-achievement" course.

For the group as a whole, neither longevity in the work force nor current income correlated directly with the women's actual "level of achievement." For example, a university administrator who had earned only a BA had spent many years serving as a community volunteer; eventually she was elected mayor of her small city, and with that experience moved into a significant role of coordinating programs between a major university and political groups. Evaluating this woman's level of achievement could not be based solely on her employment rank or income; at midlife, diverse aspects of her complex "career" contributed to her high level of "success." Similarly, a woman who had worked first as an actress and then as a university administrator completed a law degree in her early 40s; at 46 she was just beginning to build a private law practice and also expressed interest in elective politics. Whatever this woman had attempted, she had been a popular leader. Her likely success as an attorney was easy to envision, and her "achievement level" had to be considered very high despite her limited income in 1984.

Imminent high achievement could also be imagined for a community college English instructor who had spent 10 years as a homemaker and then 7 years completing a doctorate; at midlife this woman described her activities as "teaching English, doing research, writing, giving papers, publishing, and having a ball." This woman brought very high energy and creativity to her work and, despite her relatively low status within her place of employment, her overall profile was one of high achievement.

These women's stories were not exceptional among the UCLA gifted group, and their experience reflected the consistent ability of this sample to move beyond the social conventions and constraints imposed on females of their generation. As adults, these women found ways to utilize their intellectual abilities, to enter and achieve upward professional mobility, and to sustain a strong sense of efficacy and well-being over time.

Fourth, given the accelerating divorce rate for this age cohort during

recent years, the number of long-term marriages in the gifted group was disproportionately high. Although a few of the long-married women reported marital distress, the majority indicated that they felt supported emotionally by their husbands and that their marriages had grown richer over the years. Only one woman indicated that her husband had resisted the full development of her intellectual abilities. As a group, the UCLA gifted women appeared to have selected mates whose values and interests complemented their own.

Using even the most conventional measures of achievement for this cohort, therefore, the UCLA gifted women appeared to be an unusually successful, accomplished group at midlife. The majority expressed the belief that they were using their intellectual talents and living up to their potential. They were leading busy, complex lives that involved careers and relationships and community activities.

In my interviews with the women, I sought to determine what characterized the essence of work for them—what aspects of their careers gave meaning and value to their lives. For nearly all the gifted women—regardless of their technical competence, their creative ability, the nature of their work, their income, or their level of “success”—the issue of *interactive communication* stood out as the most salient characteristic of their work lives. In nearly three quarters of the interviews, the gifted women described themselves, their achievements, and their sense of professional well-being in terms of relationships. For example, when asked to describe when she was the most effective at work, a psychiatric nurse responded:

Those situations where I've done the most and best I could....Breakthroughs at work, establishing a relationship with a patient. I'm lucky. I can do that. When I've really connected, get to the nitty gritty, had a breakthrough in communication.

And a lawyer who recently had begun to work as a consultant in the field of bio-ethics stated:

I'm most effective when I'm teaching. Not just imparting information, but when I'm interacting. At [] Hospital where I work with a committee: when I have to explain medical ethics. I'm good at not provoking anger or irritation. I'm able to make them feel they're good. Reinforcing the other person's sense of competence, being able to bring out people's strengths, what they're excited about. I used to see it when I was working as a therapist. I facilitated people going out, doing; I got people thinking.

Again and again, when describing what they were “good at,” the gifted women used such words as “teaching,” “communication,” “explaining,” and “giving to others” in their responses. Frequently they spoke about their

experiences as effective educators. A college instructor who had returned to teaching after 20 years as a full-time homemaker focused more on communication than on the mathematics content she was responsible for imparting; she said that she received the greatest work gratification from

my relationship with others...my students, through them. I get a lot of satisfaction from students, out of being someone who is understanding, caring, will help them. The main thing now is to help kids grow, to be loving, kind, and to stimulate them intellectually. I am better at relating than before. I grew through parenting.

A journalist spoke of her enthusiasm for using magazine articles to broaden public understanding. Her greatest work pleasure derived from "finding out about a subject and doing something about it....I like to take something complicated and explain it to the 'little guy.'"

About one quarter of the gifted women described their work competencies in terms of organizational ability; in most of these instances the interactive aspects of the work again predominated. For example, the director of development of a large philanthropic organization perceived herself as

really good at working with people, getting others to work on projects, getting them motivated toward goals I want, getting them to be open to thinking in new ways, bringing them along, knowing how to listen to them. I'm good at bringing ideas together making it mesh. And I'm good at taking on things I know little about, picking others' brains.

Another quarter of the gifted group identified their abilities in terms of being sensitive and responsive to other people. These women used phrases such as "sensing others' needs," "talking about feelings," "discussing my own experience," "making others comfortable," and "good listener." Some of these women reported that they were also very good organizers, but the primary thrust of their responses was that they used their interpersonal skills in ways they believed were especially effective. For example, one woman who worked as project leader on very high-powered engineering contracts with the military described herself as

good at dealing with people, getting at roots of problems. People will tell me things they won't tell anyone else. Is it because I'm female? I'm obviously sensitive, so they will tell me things. And that makes me more effective. I become a storehouse of knowledge. I'm good at interpersonal relationships. I'm a good public speaker. A good organizer in my work. I like to take problems that are difficult, that are unconventional, that have not been done before.

The centrality of interpersonal communication thus dominated the

gifted women's responses about the meaning and experience of work. Consistent with the professional women interviewed by Gilligan (1982), these women appeared to place the highest value on their abilities to interact effectively with others and to foster understanding. Their relationships within the workplace were of major importance.

The theme of relationships also surfaced when these gifted women discussed how they coped with multiple roles at midlife and their "zones of vulnerability" (Baruch et al., 1983). The majority of the women spoke with enthusiasm about juggling several "selves," but they frequently reported concern about the nature of their interpersonal interactions. Regardless of their work or domestic situations, when asked about those aspects of their lives in which they felt incompetent or especially vulnerable, the gifted women tended to describe interpersonal shortcomings or frustrations. In nearly half of the interviews the women described their discomforts in terms of poor social skills or unsatisfying interpersonal relationships. For example, despite considerable public acclaim for her creative work, one woman faulted herself for her social behavior when she said, "I have poor social graces. I don't live in the world of all that stuff. I forget about it."

And a doctor who had described her competence in terms of outstanding interactions with cancer patients and their families nonetheless judged her social skills harshly:

I still feel socially incompetent....I can't say the right things, come up with the right answers. Put me with people who are intellectual and witty and I can't say anything.

Other women referred to feeling inadequate in parenting relationships, in supervisory relationships, in casual social situations, in public speaking situations, and in general "people handling." Not all of these women had described themselves as shy or socially awkward as children, although women who had been shy more often reported adult social discomfort than women who had been outgoing. Some of the most intense reports of social self-consciousness came from those gifted women who had grown up in nonintellectual, relatively lower income families that had provided limited exposure to a broader world or little validation for intellectual achievement. These women in particular felt unprepared for the demands of multiple roles in adulthood and some wondered whether they had missed certain "lessons" while growing up. They mentioned the utter absence of role models in their lives. Regardless of background, however, it appeared that a significant proportion of the gifted women felt underdeveloped and undereducated socially. Despite their skills as communicators, their overall professional success, and their talent for coping with

multiple roles, many of these women felt socially insecure. As one woman summed it up:

Nobody teaches you how to relate. You can learn other things through a book or a course. Even a therapist can't do it. Building close interpersonal relationships is the single hardest thing I do, can do....It's the one area in which I feel totally incompetent.

Balance at Midlife

Throughout the Gifted Follow-up Study, a key question was: "What do gifted women have to say about balance at midlife?" A starting assumption was that, given their unusually high intellectual aptitudes, the gifted women in this sample might demonstrate superior insight about how to make the choices and evaluate the costs that are involved in "fine-tuning" balance among competing priorities in adult life. On the other hand, given the multiple barriers that tax the development of gifted girls and confound the achievement of gifted women, perhaps it would follow that gifted women might be especially prone to "imbalance" or even disequilibrium in their various adult pursuits.

From the questionnaires and interviews, I found that the UCLA gifted women had thought a great deal about the issue of balance in their lives. As a group, these women were very articulate, and their answers reflected considerable introspection and self-awareness. As already established, these were very busy, accomplished individuals who were trying to manage complex lives; they also tended to be highly self-critical about their self-perceived limitations. Of the gifted women, 89% said that they felt they had achieved a sense of balance, but most threw in "qualifiers." For example, a university administrator said that she felt she had achieved a comfortable balance "although I am probably destined to permanent frustration as I always want to do each thing more and better." Similarly, a nurse said, "Basically I feel I've done well. But I still have trouble with trying to do everything in all areas and depleting mental and physical resources." And a woman who returned to college after a 20-year hiatus and had just completed her BA degree said, "I have achieved a balance of sorts. I am in a post-academic holding pattern because I feel I could be doing more for myself."

In their responses, the UCLA gifted women tended to suggest that achieving balance was an ongoing process—and that imbalance always lurked nearby. Family demands tended to disrupt the flow of some lives; the absence of a partner caused disequilibrium in others. For example, an attorney replied that "It's easier now; there are not so many competing

demands now that my children are grown. But I don't have an ongoing relationship with a man."

And another women wrote, "Yes, I have achieved a balance. I would definitely prefer an ongoing, stable relationship with a man to living alone, however."

Overall, the gifted women indicated that achieving a sense of balance had come only with the passage of time. Adulthood had afforded these women time to try out different roles, to discard dysfunctional behaviors, and to consolidate choices. Balance seemed to be more a function of life experience than superior intellectual insight. Achieving balance had required conscious effort for many of the gifted women. An accountant summed up the spirit of the group:

I am truly comfortable with the choices I am currently making and the real balance that I have achieved. However, I feel it's important that you know that much of my adult life has been directed at learning to achieve the balance that I now have.

STUDYING GIFTED WOMEN AT MIDLIFE: SOME CONCLUSIONS

The present investigation of gifted women was designed to obtain a broad picture of the adult life experience of 35 gifted women. As such, it did not seek to provide an in-depth analysis of the socioemotional concerns of gifted women in contemporary American life. However, despite its relatively small sample size and the absence of a matched control group of "non-gifted" women, this study yielded several important findings that inform our understanding of gifted women and point to issues for future research.

First, from the present analysis, it appears that gifted midlife women today *are* utilizing their intellectual abilities and finding professional outlets for their talents and interests. They are not falling as short of their potential as some forecasters predicted. In this regard, the UCLA women may have been "on time" for the positive roles for women afforded by the women's movement and the changing national economy. Few of these women reported major barriers to achievement in the work force. Although some of them had only recently re-entered the labor market, few were experiencing genuine "underemployment." As a group, the UCLA gifted women's experience confirmed Bardwick's (1980) prediction that the cohort of women in their 40s would be especially likely to participate in the work force in the 1980s with vitality and psychological well-being. Whether this experience will be replicated by later cohorts of gifted women requires future investigation.

Second, in and of itself, "giftedness" is but one of the important variables in women's personal or professional development. Although many of the women benefited from their intellectual talents, most felt that giftedness had not made a significant difference in their work lives. At the same time, there was evidence that the positive effects of giftedness frequently had been undermined during childhood and adolescence by mixed or negative messages from parents, teachers, and peers. Whether there are significant long-term consequences of such negative messages generally in the lives of gifted women—or whether these consequences are gradually mitigated by adult and career development—should be explored more fully.

Third, feelings of social vulnerability characterized the lives of many of the UCLA gifted women; at midlife, despite considerable achievement as communicators in the workplace, a substantial number still felt socially awkward or insecure. This phenomenon may have reflected the fact that the UCLA gifted women grew up at a time when the assertion of their talents was generally discouraged; as adults, when expected to promote themselves and their abilities, they may have suffered the continuing effects of childhood shyness or adolescent "hiding." Or it may be that these women were more inclined to develop their intellectual strengths rather than "learn" more ephemeral lessons about relationships. Or it could be that when asked about their vulnerabilities most women tend to cite interpersonal insecurities more than other concerns. Whether or not lifelong patterns of social vulnerability exist among other gifted groups remains to be seen. Certainly the dilemma of social inhibition among gifted women still remains an important area for research.

Fourth, interpersonal relationships appeared to lie at the center of the lives of the UCLA gifted women. Although these women may have been shy as children, may have hidden their talents, may have felt ambivalent about giftedness, and may have developed intellectually more comfortably than socially, as adults they found relationships, pursued careers, and developed a sense of balance in their lives. They prided themselves on their communication and teaching skills; perhaps because they had tended to be good students, they had come to understand what learning and the fostering of learning are about. They were self-critical about their interpersonal limitations; it may be that because they had encountered potential social rejection they had become unusually sensitive to the importance of healthy interpersonal skills. Future studies of gifted women should include specific inquiries about the nature of this population's interpersonal experiences.

Fifth, as midlife women, the UCLA gifted group demonstrated acquaintance with the issue of balance. These women had discovered that balance in life does not come automatically, and they demonstrated how they had made careful choices in order to effectively handle competing demands. At

midlife, the majority of these women felt they had achieved a sense of balance, and they articulated the benefits of life experience and maturity. At the same time, their responses implied that they would have to remain vigilant in order to keep their lives "in tune." From these responses, it is clear that many questions remain about how competent, interpersonally responsible women can achieve and maintain balance in their lives.

Finally, in studying the work lives of gifted women, it is reasonable to expect that we will find women who are faring well, endeavoring (along with the rest of us) to find meaningful work and positive interpersonal relationships. As we study the lives of such women, we should not be too surprised to find genuine stories of "success." The current cohorts of gifted women are being afforded new and exciting opportunities, and many of them are capitalizing on their talents and strengths to truly "fulfill the promise." On the other hand, when we study gifted women, we must remain sensitive to the ongoing themes of personal insecurity and interpersonal vulnerability that continue to punctuate women's lives. We need to help gifted women to attend to both their intellectual development and their interpersonal needs. Only then will gifted women gain the personal and professional power of which they are fully capable.

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