What is it like to be YOUNG, GIFTED AND WORKING CLASS in contemporary England?

How do working class family values support high educational achievement?

What do researchers and policy makers have to learn about giftedness from working class families?

These provocative questions are explored in this ground-breaking book. Most studies of giftedness focus on the characteristics of individuals, and draw upon psychological frameworks to understand them. Participants in most gifted education programmes are recruited disproportionately from the higher social classes. Sceptical of the concept of giftedness, Mazzoli Smith and Campbell question conventional methodologies, using a narrative approach to understand how four families of working class origins, each with a gifted child, construct their values in relation to education and social class. They explore the influence of their family histories, cultural values and life styles upon educational engagement and achievement.

The authors show that gifted education policies are poorly matched to the values of these families and argue that much research into giftedness has been flawed by social and cultural discrimination. They propose an agenda for change in research paradigms in the giftedness field, which should be characterized by interdisciplinarity and more culturally relative conceptions of giftedness.

Cover image courtesy of Ashley Corr - www.ashleycorr.com
Families, Education and Giftedness
Advances in Creativity and Gifted Education (ADVA) is the first internationally established book series that focuses exclusively on the constructs of creativity and giftedness as pertaining to the psychology, philosophy, pedagogy and ecology of talent development across the milieus of family, school, institutions and society. ADVA strives to synthesize both domain specific and domain general efforts at developing creativity, giftedness and talent. The books in the series are international in scope and include the efforts of researchers, clinicians and practitioners across the globe.

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This book focuses on the needs of creatively gifted students and how schools can meet those needs. Creatively gifted students are those who show exceptional levels of creativity. These students may or may not have other talents and abilities (such as high academic potential or musical talent). The needs of creatively gifted students may not be recognized by current gifted education programs, even when creatively gifted students are included in those programs, and schools often do not know what they can do to meet these students' special needs. The goal of this book is to share cutting-edge research about the attributes and needs of creatively gifted students and the kinds of programs that best meet the special needs of creatively gifted students.

The problem is not that creativity is ignored by gifted education programs. That may be the case in some schools, but most gifted education programs have the promotion of creativity as one of their goals, and many include creativity in their screening process. Once students have entered gifted/talented programs, there is often (although not always) some effort made to nurture the creativity of the students in the program, whatever their particular gifts or talents or abilities. The importance of creativity is therefore often explicitly endorsed and creative-thinking skills are often promoted. Despite this attention to the need to promote and nurture creativity of students in gifted education programs, there is an almost invisible lacuna in the way gifted education treats creatively gifted students. Exhibiting creativity may help a student in the selection process and creative-thinking activities may be part of the program itself. The special and important needs of creatively gifted students, however, are often overlooked. In contrast, a student in a gifted education program with extreme math or science or language abilities will likely be given opportunities to accelerate her math or science or language arts studies, work with a mentor in that area, or be given other opportunities related to her special area of ability and interest.
Volume 5. The Roeper School - A Model for Holistic Development of High Ability

Edited by
Bharath Sriraman, The University of Montana
Don Ambrose, Rider University
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This book focuses on various facets of The Roeper School in Michigan which make it a unique school for the development of high ability. The contributions in this book emphasize the history and philosophy of the school, its programming and curricula, and its holistic approach to talent development by attending to the whole child. The school has a number of distinctive positive attributes, which include the ways in which it values and emphasizes the following:

1. an atmosphere of caring and respect with a balance between individual and community needs, and a balance between individual rights and responsibilities; students generally feel emotionally, physically, socially, and intellectually safe.
2. diversity in points of view, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and religion.
3. equity and justice, ethics and altruism; service to, and integration with, the community and the world.
4. attention to the whole child; integration of the cognitive, social, emotional, motivational, and physical aspects of the student.
5. special attention to the social and emotional development of students.
6. a collaborative, democratic approach to governance and innovation; a collaborative spirit among faculty, staff, and administration; curriculum development and delivery of instruction influenced by relationship-based partnerships among students and teachers.
7. intrapersonal intelligence: learning one’s own strengths, weaknesses, and motivations and then using that self-knowledge to guide one’s own future development; students’ individual interests as driving forces for motivation and learning.
8. engagement of families in the learning process.
9. lifelong learning.
10. low student-faculty ratio.
11. faculty autonomy in curriculum design, to the extent possible.
12. a prominent place for the arts in the curriculum
13. inquiry-based and lab-based approaches to science teaching.
14. a balance between product and process emphases in curriculum and instruction.
Contributors to this book include researchers in gifted education, current and former editorial board members of The Roeper Review, in addition to school personnel collaborating as coauthors and/or as field-based partners in empirical projects.
Families, Education and Giftedness

*Case Studies in the Construction of High Achievement*

Laura Mazzoli Smith
Jim Campbell

*University of Warwick, UK*
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SERIES PREFACE

The third volume in Advances in Creativity and Giftedness problematizes “giftedness”, “social class” and the role values within family structures play in the opportunities/avenues for talent development. This book provides a history of the use/misuse of monikers and terminology largely derived from research in psychology and argues that “giftedness” is a culturally dependent term. Four case studies of working class families in the U.K are constructed using a thick narrative inquiry approach, which shed light into understanding giftedness within a sociological/historical conceptual framework. In doing so, the authors move beyond the limitations imposed by traditional psychological studies which view giftedness as an innate construct as opposed to a socially constructed construct. The book also addresses historical/post-colonial biases in the traditional treatment of the construct of “giftedness” and proposes a paradigm shift for the field based on the findings of the case studies and their theoretical analysis based on a very diverse canon of literature.

Bharath Sriraman, Series Editor
Missoula, MT
October 10, 2012
There are two highly problematic concepts and terminology underlying the arguments in this book; giftedness and social class. In the case of both, we have had to be fairly pragmatic in the way we have used them.

The noun, ‘Giftedness’, and the adjective, ‘Gifted’, are strange, unhelpful and highly contested terms, recalling ancient views of endowment by God or gods. The terms are also poorly defined and inconsistently operationalized in educational programmes and research projects. It is difficult to understand why they continue to be found useful. However, for this book we were stuck with them. This is because between 2004 and 2007 we worked at the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY), established as the principal element of the English government’s national programme, and based at the University of Warwick from 2002 until 2007. The programme used a somewhat arbitrary distinction, with ‘gifted’ referring to high achievement in cognitive areas, such as mathematics, science and English, and ‘talented’ referring to achievement in creative areas, such as the arts, music, and dance. (High achievement in Sport was a discrete programme, funded and managed separately). The government adopted and promoted ‘gifted and talented’ as a formal descriptor of the national programme, of the teachers in schools responsible for implementing the programme, of the students themselves, and of the register used to create a national database. Since we were investigating students identified as gifted in the national programme, we were, as we say, stuck with the terminology.

Our preference would have been for a descriptor that was less troubling, more empirically demonstrable, and more neutral, such as ‘high achievement’, ‘high achievers’, but we have used ‘gifted’ because it was the term our participants, through their involvement in the national programme, had learned to adopt. As will be clear from our review in Chapter 1, we view the concept of giftedness with considerable unease, recognising the uncertainty in its meaning, the forms in which it has been socially constructed, and the biases embedded in it.

‘Social class’ is problematic for different reasons. It reflects an important and commonly adopted way of thinking about a society pervasively divided by social, cultural and economic fractures. And it has been shown to have powerful explanatory force in understanding variations in educational achievement. Yet its measurement is contestable, and as a concept it is disputed and value-laden. Most post-war measurement used the formal classifications of the Registrar General, which were based on occupational rankings, and tended to take male occupation as the base measure, sometimes combined with level of education of the mother. These have come to be seen as too formulaic, disguising important cultural and sub-cultural differences within different classes, and downplaying the effect of
societal shifts in such matters as ethnic composition of the population, and gender composition of the workforce. A concept in which cultural processes and life style could be more adequately represented was called for, even though such models of class might tend to lack the apparent objectivity of the Registrar General’s formulae.

We adopted a geo-demographic classification: A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods (ACORN), essentially a post-code based marketing database, which combined social and economic factors with life style characteristics. There are approximately two million post-codes in the UK, the average postcode being shared by 14-15 households. The marketing firm CACI produced ACORN from the most recent national census and various marketing and lifestyle databases. Information used included demographic variables, e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, income, education levels, home ownership, etc., and lifestyle variables such as interest in current affairs, newspapers read, holidays, hobbies and shopping habits. In our view, this array of information provided a better proxy for cultural capital than simple socio-economic status.

This database has five main categories and 51 sub-categories, and, in projects with very large samples, could capture cultural practices together with the more conventional socio-economic factors. It has the disadvantage that it classifies neighbourhoods, not individual families or households. This disadvantage is significantly reduced in studies like ours, where ACORN was used as a preliminary filter, and the serious investigation was qualitative, namely into the culture and values of the identified families.

We selected families falling into the Moderate Means classification - according to CACI typically neighbourhoods in what used to be industrial heartlands of the country, with many employed in traditional blue collar occupations, or in service or retail jobs. Some areas have low levels of qualifications with some isolated areas of unemployment and long term illness. Most housing is terraced with two or three bedrooms and includes many former council houses bought by their tenants in the 1980s. (www.caci.co.uk, for further details). In the text we have used the broad brush term ‘working class’ to refer to our families, which turned out to be accurate as a way of describing our families’ social origins and the areas in which they lived. But there was considerable variation, as might be expected, in their current socio-economic positions and value orientation. We therefore use ‘working class’ as a shorthand marker of culture, values, lifestyle, and type of neighbourhood, rather than a precise signifier of common socio-economic status. Yet ‘working class’ is in many ways as unhelpful as ‘gifted’, in that it is used inconsistently, carries different meanings for different people, including those in our sample, and carries value judgements. For instance, our participants referred to the social classes they perceived to be, by convention, below and above them, the underclass and the middle class, though not always in those terms. Both are problematic, but again we have used them as a short-hand for the cultures our participants abhorred or aspired to.
Notwithstanding these ongoing issues with the terminology, we perceive there to be a real need, in light of the national policy on labelling and registering children of high achievement in school as gifted, to address the policy’s relationship to social class. For this reason, we have used these terms explicitly throughout.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The material in this book was based on a PhD. thesis in the Institute of Education, University of Warwick, written by Laura Mazzoli Smith: *Attitudes to Education in Some Families with Gifted Children: An Approach through Narrative*.

Research for the thesis was carried out between 2006 and 2010, and the field work was conducted over 2008/9. We are grateful to the examiners of the thesis, Professor Richard Pring (University of Oxford) and Professor Geoff Lindsay (University of Warwick).

The study was supported by scholarships from the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY) and from the University of Warwick. We are very grateful to the families who agreed to take part in this study and give of their time.

We have benefited from support, advice and ideas from our partners, Dr Benedict Smith (Durham University) and Professor Wendy Robinson (University of Exeter), but we are responsible for the material as it appears in the book. Laura Mazzoli Smith would also like to acknowledge the support her parents have given her, both during her time as a PhD. student, and in writing this book.
INTRODUCTION

Our purpose in writing this book is threefold:
– to report some empirical evidence on four families of working class origin with children identified as gifted;
– to connect the evidence to theories and methodologies on giftedness; and,
– to contribute to an approach to understanding giftedness and gifted education that is largely sociological/historical in its concepts and methodologies, with the latter of these drawing heavily upon narrative enquiry.

Our approach is not unique, but is not, as yet, adequately developed in the field of research and scholarship about giftedness.

The book arose from a PhD. thesis, *Attitudes to Education in Some Families with Gifted Children: An Approach through Narrative* (Mazzoli, 2010), and therefore was influenced substantially by the theories and methodology underlying it. These were broadly socio-historical, and saw the dominance of psychological concepts and methods in the field of giftedness as understandable, but problematic. Since the research was directed towards building up descriptions of under-researched areas and theory generation, it necessarily involved a degree of *a priori* thinking; a decision regarding the orientation that informs this research had already been taken in order to address the dominance of a set of approaches to researching giftedness, and so broaden the research base. It was also seen as important to socially-embed a concept which is called on to support a variety of agendas both inclusive and elitist, yet which regularly fails to account for its own ideologically-driven nature.

We make this point at the outset since we are not however, as some researchers are, opposed to the appropriate provision of education that meets the needs of highly achieving students; we are rather examining, as neutrally as we can given our qualitative methods, the repercussions for such students and their families of particular research orientations and policy formation and implementation. Whilst we have presupposed that ‘giftedness’, as it has been understood and utilized in recent years, is largely the result of historical contingencies, this is not the same as saying that some students, at certain times, are not able to considerably outperform others, and that they need appropriate educational support and provision.

It appears to be the case that this needs stating since the field is characterized both by impressively intellectual research and scholarship, but also by political or ideological divisions, and, to some extent, partisan advocacy tending toward the evangelical. Psychologists of giftedness often think of giftedness as primarily innate and want schooling to provide in a differentiated form for students labelled as gifted; sociologists of education, if they theorise about giftedness at all, tend to think of it as socially and ethnically divisive and serving the interests of elite
groups. Our response to these fractures in the field is outlined in the Preface, where we have attempted to show how problematic the concepts of giftedness and social class are, and in Chapter 1, where we argue that giftedness is fundamentally a socially constructed idea, rather than a quality inherent in an individual, measurable as if it were somehow disconnected from society. Our aspiration is towards a critical research orientation, with the potential to bring together bodies of knowledge, rather than keep them apart. With this in mind, we hope the book will of interest to a broader readership than research on giftedness sometimes inspires, and hence we present an overview of our central areas of concern; giftedness, families, and education, in the opening chapters.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is in three sections.

– Section 1: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES
  The first three chapters investigate the theorising about giftedness, and about the nature of families, and explore a rationale for the methodology we adopted.

– Section 2: THE CASE STUDIES
  The next four chapters report our empirical evidence, as case studies; the narratives that families constructed about their family histories, their educational and family value systems, the meanings they attached to social class, how they understood giftedness, and their experience of the English national gifted education programme. These narratives flow from the group interviews conducted with the families.

– Section 3: INTERPRETATIONS AND CONCLUSION
  The opening chapter attempts to interpret the family narratives and make some comparisons between them. In the next chapter we interpret the narratives in the light of the literature we reviewed in Chapters 1 and 2. Our final chapter proposes the case for a substantial revisionism in the concepts and methodologies, drawing attention to the value of cultural relativism and interdisciplinarity for research on giftedness.
PART I: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES
CHAPTER 1

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GIFTEDNESS

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

White (2006) produced a penetrating examination of the lives and beliefs of the men responsible for shaping the field of research on intelligence, intelligence testing and its influence on schooling in England at the start of the twentieth century. White’s work is important because of its long view from the Reformation to contemporary policy, and because it assumed giftedness as a socially constructed concept. Francis Galton, having first posited innate, general intelligence in 1865, is often said to be the founder of the field. Cyril Burt and Robert Morant, whose subsequent work was in educational psychology and administration respectively, brought Galton’s ideas into mainstream education in England. White claimed that both Burt and Morant shared an interest in the classification and grouping of the school population in line with predicted educational outcomes.

Morant was instrumental in drafting the 1902 Education Act, which created a selective education system in England, with different curricula being provided for pupils at elementary and secondary schools. Burt supported ‘treble-tracking’ children in elementary schools based on measured intelligence because he claimed, after Galton, that this was fixed by heredity. This idea was embedded in the school system by the Spens Committee in 1938. The selection and tracking of pupils by academic ability based on the results of tests of intelligence around age eleven (the ‘eleven plus’ test) was justified by Burt as follows:

> It is essential in the interests alike of the children themselves and of the nation as a whole, that those who possess the highest ability – the cleverest of the clever – should be identified as accurately as possible.
> (Burt, 1959, p. 117, cited in White, 2006, p. 10)

This statement resonates with those made more recently for distinctive education treatment for the gifted:

> ...a country would be well-advised to give gifted education a more central location. Today’s gifted pupils are tomorrow’s social, intellectual, economic and cultural leaders and their development cannot be left to chance. (Eyre, 2004a, cited in Campbell et al., 2005, p. 5)
White drew out the defining features of intelligence, as conceived by Galton, and Burt, claiming that these were still influencing conceptions of giftedness today. These were:

- It is intellectual. That is it is a cognitive capacity defined by qualities such as the possession of logic and the pursuit of truth. It is therefore ascertainable through academic exams and specific types of test (logical, numerical and verbal).
- It is general. It influences ability in all areas and it therefore follows that people are more or less intelligent and can be classified accordingly.
- It is innate and passed on by heredity. The implication of this is that individuals possess a limited amount.

Kaufman and Sternberg (2007), in reviewing how the identification and education of gifted children increased markedly during the Cold War era in America, said that historical events have an important impact on which type of giftedness receives the most support. White cautioned that it is, therefore, of the utmost importance to keep in mind such historical contingencies when analysing current conceptions of intelligence.

By describing the Puritan religious context of the men who shaped the field, White demonstrated how their shared backgrounds would have provided them with a similar set of values. White mapped their beliefs onto the nascent conceptions of intelligence that they helped forge. Margolin also claimed that ‘the characteristics of giftedness are woven with and through the threads of the Protestant ethic’ (Margolin, 1994, p. 136). This socio-historical approach enabled White to claim that a particular cognitive conception of innate intelligence prevailed because it served practical and political ends. It provided the rationalization for selecting pupils for the newly-devised secondary schools, and justified the different and less challenging curriculum provided to students in elementary schools. White made the point that along with the idea of an innate intelligence came the idea that it was limited; there was a natural ceiling for everyone. Salvation is for the few not the many. As White noted this was a contentious belief because it was untestable and therefore unverifiable.

The American educationalist Borland (1997, 2005) followed a similar line of argument, also drawing on historical material, claiming that,

…the construct that emerged…reflects specific forces that served socio-political interests as they played out in the education system. (Borland, 2005, p. 3)

He identified how the birth of giftedness as a scientific construct went hand in hand with the birth of intelligence as a scientific construct, Galton quantifying both. He also noted that Terman was responsible for both the early work in gifted education and the appropriation of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale.
in America. Spearman was concerned that Binet’s intelligence test was not grounded by an underlying theoretical conception of intelligence, and indeed Sacks (1999) claimed that from the outset Binet grappled with what exactly his scale was measuring since it was clearly influenced by cultural factors. Kaufman and Sternberg (2007), in reviewing the historical evidence, highlighted that Binet believed intelligence was malleable and not entirely fixed. Spearman had inter-correlated all the tests to arrive at a factor which he claimed was responsible for individual differences in test scores. The factor came to be known as g for general intelligence and was defined as being innate to all individuals, and in addition Spearman also posited s, that is a factor specific to each test. Freeman stated that Spearman’s view of g is ‘still accepted and used today by most psychologists’ (Freeman, 2001, p. 5). Howe (1997) pointed out that Spearman not only disagreed with the view that individual differences in people’s capabilities were largely due to their different experiences, but also thought this position hedonistic and amoral, implying that Spearman’s viewpoint had a moral, as well as a scientific perspective.

Borland also argued that tests which could assess and classify students were attractive in America early in the twentieth century because the school population was becoming more diverse. Immigration rose rapidly and compulsory schooling saw children who would previously have gone into work early, remain in education. For Borland, educational responses to an increasingly diverse population could either move towards accommodating differences through a diverse, flexible curriculum or justify a stratified one. The latter position would manifest the need for procedures to identify the different populations, - what Borland (2005) referred to as the circularity that still dominates the field; the conception we held of giftedness assumed a population differentiated by ability and created the need for identification procedures which then re-confirmed the existence of the concept.

From a different perspective, Sternberg also traced the historical antecedents of intelligence. Sternberg (1990, 2007) identified Galton and Binet as central to the development of research on intelligence and stated that both held very different implicit theories of intelligence, which led them in different directions. Galton linked intelligence to physical attributes such as energy and sensitivity, and therefore thought the best way to measure intelligence was through sensory discrimination tasks. Binet stressed the importance of judgement and devised a test to assess higher level cognitive skills. Galton was driven by scientific concerns and a belief in the hereditary, fixed nature of intelligence, whereas Binet was interested in practical educational outcomes. However, Sternberg argued that Binet was not atheoretical in his approach to intelligence, conceptualizing two types; ideational intelligence which was logical and reasoning, and instinctive intelligence which drew on feeling. Sternberg claimed that Binet and Simon’s sophisticated ideas were the forerunners to contemporary work in metacognitive information processing.
and he argued that the Stanford-Binet intelligence scales did not do justice to the breadth of their originators’ conceptions of the nature of intelligence. Sternberg’s account acknowledged the ways in which the implicit conceptions of researchers in the field shaped the ways in which they developed and tested their theories. The Galton/Binet debate demonstrated how the polarised beliefs about intelligence, evident today, have existed from the outset of such research. Sternberg (1990) also claimed that researchers extrapolated and generalized their findings beyond that which their samples could support, typically without cross-cultural or age-related comparisons. However, Sternberg was not a relativist when it came to understanding intelligence. He held that there was an objective, scientifically-valid definition which we are still searching for, and that this was not incompatible with simultaneously providing a sophisticated account of different conceptions and approaches to understanding intelligence and giftedness.

CONCEPTIONS OF INTELLIGENCE AND GIFTEDNESS

Freeman’s Review of Research for OFSTED (1998a) provided a useful analysis of contemporary conceptions. She argued that:

Research shows that the very able are not a homogeneous group, whether in terms of learning style, creativity, speed of development, personality or social behaviour. Consequently, there are perhaps 100 definitions of ‘giftedness’ around, almost all of which refer to children’s precocity, either in psychological constructs, such as intelligence and creativity, but more usually in terms of high marks in school subjects…(Freeman, 1998a, pp. 1–2)

Freeman (2005) stated that different cultural definitions of giftedness represented the different social constructions of identity and development potential that dominated in particular countries. Likewise, Winstanley (2006) concluded that because gifted students were a heterogeneous group, it might not be possible to arrive at one comprehensive definition. Descriptions of the multifaceted way in which giftedness had been conceived by scholars were problematic for Margolin:

…but if there are as many definitions of giftedness as there are instruments and programs to measure them, then general statements about ‘the gifted’ appear logically impossible…..one can easily argue that….the accumulation and transfer of gifted child knowledge across settings is impossible. (Margolin, 1994, p. 100)

Although logically Margolin’s point had force, one can highlight all manner of other psychological and medical terms, for instance, schizophrenia, which defy consensus, yet which arguably serve a practical purpose.
Nonetheless Renzulli’s (2004) discussion of the criterion problem, that is the absence of an ultimate criterion to which predictors of giftedness can be compared, and moreover his assertion that such a criterion could not be empirically established and was a values-based decision, was accepted by many in the field as a rationale for including more than just standardized test results in assessment of giftedness.

The lack of an agreed definition of giftedness therefore continues to dominate the field. However Sternberg (2004) says that there was consensus around the following areas:

- giftedness involves more than just IQ;
- it has non-cognitive components (e.g., motivation);
- the environment is crucial to realize potential;
- there are multiple forms therefore one kind of assessment / provision is too narrow;
- measures of giftedness need to be evaluated.

Sternberg and Zhang (2004) stated that there has been a shift in testing away from intelligence and achievement tests, to performance and product-based assessment, so what was considered valid as a demonstration of giftedness had also changed. To some extent, how giftedness was conceived by the research community was away from an idea of fixed, general intelligence, towards a more developmental notion of multivariate intelligence that developed in context, and was measured by specific aptitudes or factors, as evidenced in the work of Renzulli (1977), Sternberg (1990), Freeman et al. (1995), Gardner (1999), and Gagné (2000), for example.

We can illustrate the uncertainty in conceptualisation from the work of two theorists and educators in this respect: Sternberg, who asserted that there was indeed an objectively-verifiable definition of intelligence; and Borland, who claimed that giftedness was a socially-constructed category.

Sternberg (1990) proposed two particularly salient ideas about research on intelligence. Firstly that it was guided by metaphors, and secondly, that both implicit and explicit theories should be considered. He examined the thesis that research was driven by different models or metaphors which generated particular questions:

The root source of many of the questions asked about intelligence appears to be the model, or metaphor, that drives the theory and research. In order to understand the evolution and current state of theory and research on intelligence, one must first look at the metaphors that have motived the theory and research and then at the questions that the metaphors have generated in the theories addressed…(Sternberg, 1990, p. 3)
This approach was important in enabling scientists to ‘become more aware of both the range and boundaries of their theories’ (Sternberg, 1990, p. 5). Sternberg produced a taxonomy of human intelligence according to the metaphors that had guided theory. The first set of metaphors were inward-looking, concerned with the internal world of the individual. So the geographic metaphor aimed to provide a map of the mind, the computational metaphor envisioned the mind as a computer and the biological metaphor viewed intelligence in terms of brain functions.

Theories shaped by anthropological and sociological metaphors were outward-looking, concerned with the relationship of intelligence to the external world, as an adaptation to a particular culture; to understand intelligence we have to understand culture. Sternberg (1990) believed that the anthropological metaphor was important in providing theories of intelligence which were not just within an individual’s mind, but was critical of accounts which were wholly defined by context, saying that theory should incorporated both cognitive and contextual elements. The sociological metaphor viewed intelligence as moving from the external world into the individual, for instance Vygotsky’s (1978) account of children internalizing external operations they observed. Sternberg located himself as being defined by the systems metaphor, where intelligence was the interaction of multiple systems. In his case three information-processing components interacted; meta-components, performance components and knowledge (Sternberg, 1985).

Sternberg drew a distinction between explicit and implicit theories of intelligence:

Explicit theories of intelligence are constructions of psychologists or other scientists that are based, or at least tested, on data collected from people performing tasks presumed to measure intellectual functioning. Implicit theories of intelligence are constructions of people (psychologists or laypersons or others) that reside in the minds of these individuals, whether as definitions or otherwise. Such theories need to be discovered rather than invented because they already exist, in some form, in people’s heads. (Sternberg, 1990, pp. 53–54)

He argued that implicit theories of intelligence matter in that they drove how people thought about their own intelligence and that of others. Implicit theories could, for instance, suggest the need for broader views of intelligence, precisely what might have driven the shift in explicit theories from more static, to fluid and multivariate models. His Pentagonal Implicit Theory of Giftedness (2004) was used to capture and systematize people’s intuitions about giftedness.

Sternberg’s work demonstrated that attitudes towards intelligence would not only vary, but were also embedded in the way in which the research in the field was conducted. According to Sternberg, it was not necessary to claim that giftedness was a wholly socially constructed concept in order to recognise that
attitudes towards it were value-laden and influenced the way in which both experts and laypeople conceptualized and approached giftedness.

Other approaches followed a wholly constructivist route, questioning the very foundations of modernist psychology, which they claimed failed to account for the way in which individuals, and social knowledge, are socially and culturally embedded and therefore makes false claims about the objectivity of its knowledge. As Borland argues:

To state that a construct is socially constructed is to state that it gains its meaning, even its existence, from people’s interactions, especially their discourse. (Borland, 1997, p. 7)

Borland drew a distinction between researchers and educationalists in the field who acknowledged rhetorically that giftedness was socially constructed, yet continued to act as though it is something innate and fixed, and others who actually followed through the implications of understanding giftedness as socially constructed. Likewise Plucker and Barab (2005) were concerned that even when identification processes incorporate contextual or ‘subjective’ criteria, they would often revert to standardized test scores in practice. Borland (1997, 2005) categorized conceptions of giftedness by their practical implications, consistent with his call to focus on whether the outcomes of using giftedness in the ways that we do were beneficial or harmful. This was evident in his categorisation of multi-trait models of giftedness as either disjunctive or conjunctive, for instance:

Disjunctive definitions imply that there are different and distinct forms of giftedness and lead to the logical conclusion that programs must be multifaceted to address these various kinds of giftedness adequately. (Borland, 1997, p. 14)

An example of a disjunctive conception is Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences. Gardner (1999), influenced by the view which saw intelligence as situated and understood in context (he cited artistic ability as an exemplary case here), says that it then would not make sense to think of it as a separate capacity within a person. Gardner defined his theory of multiple intelligences as,

...a biopsychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture. (Gardner, 1999, p. 33)

From this starting point Gardner arrived at a theory of intelligences as unique to each individual, arising from a combination of genetic inheritance, individual life circumstances, and the values of the given culture. Gardner claimed that other theorists, such as Sternberg, make the mistake of analysing all intelligences through the frame of linguistic or logical intelligence and had an unnecessarily narrow conception of intelligence as a result. However
Gardner’s theory, despite being widely cited by modern educationalists, has been criticized for not being adequately tested empirically (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2007).

Conjunctive conceptions meanwhile had a single profile, in which a number of traits must all be present together. For instance, Renzulli’s three-ring definition (1977) stated that above-average ability, creativity and task commitment had all to be present to lead to creative-productive giftedness. Borland (1997) observed that conjunctive conceptions of giftedness led to more straight-forward models of identification and provision, whereas disjunctive conceptions posed significant practical difficulties, programmes inevitably needing to be more broad and flexible.

The contemporary field of gifted education represented giftedness as a ‘state’ and not a ‘trait’ - better conceived of as a complex interaction of individual and environmental factors than as an objectively classifiable, and hence easily identifiable, individual quality. Identification criteria were therefore broader. Methods of identification were linked to conceptions of intelligence and changes in one would affect changes in the other. Borland linked this trend to the zeitgeist; a move towards post-positivist modes of inquiry, an increasing acceptance of some degree of cross-cultural relativism and concerns over social equity, discussed in more detail below.

But Plucker and Barab (2005) remained concerned that the focus on finding gifted children pointed to the fact that there was still a bias towards conceiving of giftedness as a psychological trait. Howe reminded us that direct successors to Spearman’s fixed, hereditary view of general intelligence, such as Jensen’s (1998), were still popular. Indeed, he claimed that Herrnstein and Murray’s portrait of heritable, fixed intelligence in The Bell Curve (1994) had made a much greater impact than either Sternberg or Gardner had. Howe (1997) suggested reasons for this included the apparent simplicity that ideas of heritable and fixed intelligence brought, and the fact that this view absolved society from responsibility for resulting social inequalities.

One other problematic conceptual issue was raised by Persson, who argued that there had been a hegemonic control over concepts of giftedness by Western scientists, to the detriment of the development of more culturally sensitive ideas. In a long paper reviewing the attempts to settle on a single objective concept he concluded that, ‘the prospect of arriving at one all-inclusive and universal theory of giftedness is bleak at best’ (2012, forthcoming). It would be better to adopt a culturally relative definition that, ‘someone gifted is perhaps best thought of broadly as an individual who is more able than most others in regard to a culturally valued ability in any given population’ (Persson, 2012, forthcoming). We explore Persson’s ideas and implications for research in Chapter 10.
Research carried out to date suggested broadly that teachers’ conceptions of giftedness were highly variable and often socially biased. Teachers who were most knowledgeable about gifted and talented students (Morris, 1987; Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Begin & Gagné, 1994; Tallent-Runnels & Tirri, 2000) held the most favourable attitudes. The other statistically significant predictor of attitudes towards gifted education, according to Begin and Gagné, was socioeconomic status; the higher a teacher’s socioeconomic status, the more positive they were likely to be about gifted students. This socio-cultural aspect of constructions of giftedness was supported by studies which reported cross-cultural differences in attitudes (Ojanen & Freeman, 1994; Tallent-Runnels & Tirri, 2000).

However studies that considered teachers within the same culture are also pertinent. Hany’s (1995) study illustrated how English teachers could be biased in their judgements, in that they chose pupils who most fitted their expectations. As Freeman said:

…if children are chosen subjectively by teachers and parents, even if the choices are further refined by tests, the selection will be different from those chosen entirely by tests. (Freeman, 2005, p. 82)

English teachers (Denton & Postlethwaite, 1985; Hany, 1995) and American teachers (Peterson & Margolin, 1997) mostly judged high potential by general rather than domain-specific ability. There was evidence of cultural and ideological bias in America (Neumeister et al., 2007), Australia (Lee, 1999; Schulz, 2005) and England (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Radnor et al., 2007). In England this had not been helped by policy confusion (McClure, 2006).

The problem was systemic, not restricted to teachers. Social inclusion in education had become particularly prominent since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNESCO, 1989), although educational inclusion tended to prioritise special needs and marginalised groups, and gifted children were not seen to fall into these categories (Smith, 2006a). The possibility of constructing giftedness as a basis for inclusivity had been raised as highly problematic by Borland:

Despite decades of efforts to eliminate racial and socioeconomic imbalances in how gifted students are identified and educated, gifted programs have continued to serve White middle-class and upper-middle-class children to a degree disproportionate to their numbers in the population while underserving poor children and children of color. (Borland, 2005, pp. 11–12)
Central to Borland’s assessment was his questioning of whether there was something intrinsic to education for gifted students which could not avoid social inequality, whatever the desires or claims of those working in the field. When giftedness was generally seen to be an innate, definable quality, resulting social inequality was not perceived to be a result of the practice of identifying gifted students. However, in a climate where the nature of giftedness was much more open to debate, questions about how far those continuing to create and run gifted programmes should be accountable for the resulting educational and social inequalities were not so easily avoided.

Smith (2006b) offered a penetrating analysis of Scottish gifted and talented policy. She noted that the holistic ideals underpinning educational inclusivity more broadly dovetail well with the more inclusive approach taken recently in gifted and talented education. However Smith, in referring to the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, was concerned that extending the remit to ‘both ends’ of the bell curve in fact did nothing to challenge the normative and reductionist tendencies inherent in such ‘diagnose and cure’ thinking (2006b). For Smith, ‘the act does nothing to address learning and teaching or attitudes and beliefs’ leaving Scotland ‘caught in a reductionist set of beliefs that mean contradictions and tensions appear in the system’ (Smith, 2006b, p. 16).

The point Smith made was that the transition from reductionist to holistic constructivism in educational thought and policy was not a smooth one and that inclusion, whilst it offered the possibility for change, was affected by the structural determinants of a reductionist legacy. As White claimed about English gifted and talented policy, it ‘…is in direct line of descent from Galton’s study of eminent individuals in Hereditary Genius’ (White, 2006, p. 142).

Margolin (1994) described two of the problems in gifted research: firstly that insufficient consideration had been given to the implications of acknowledging that giftedness was a social construct; and, secondly, that since the foundations of the field conceived of giftedness as a natural, biological fact, nothing short of a paradigm shift (as advocated by Smith, 2006b) was necessary for contemporary research to hold to a notion of giftedness as socially constructed. Margolin’s implication that the shift of tone in gifted scholarship towards inclusion was a cynical move to maintain legitimacy was perhaps questionable. However, the core question of whether continued use of the term giftedness could in fact accommodate a more constructivist ontology remains.

Sapon-Shevin offered a polemical and also heavily criticized (e.g., Borland, 1996) attack on gifted education. Sapon-Shevin epitomized the forceful camp concerned with ‘the gross inequalities in who gets labelled as ‘gifted’’ and the concern that resulting ‘differentiated opportunities further compound whatever inequalities children bring to school’ (Sapon-Shevin, 1994, p. 30). Sapon-Shevin argued that proponents of gifted education frequently denied the
political basis, or bias, of their work, by hiding behind purported scientific neutrality.

Winstanley (2006) gave the example of a potentially gifted pianist, who could only show her talent through access to a piano and music lessons. Meeting needs, she argued, should be separated from valuing equality as they were not necessarily the same thing. Freeman advocated meeting gifted students’ needs as a necessary part of an equitable education system. She argued that the part environmental factors played in the intellectual development of gifted students was greater than for other students, and consequently:

When the intellectually gifted have poor educational nourishment, they will be relatively more deprived in this respect than less able children, because their potential to make use of it is so much greater. (Freeman, 2001, p. 17)

Despite the force of her argument, there might be two issues here. Freeman ran the risk of appearing to treat gifted students as an homogeneous group, and as a group deserving preferential educational treatment.

Bourdieu looked at the social consequences of such privilege:

…the ideology of giftedness, the cornerstone of the whole educational and social system, helps to enclose the underprivileged classes in the roles which society has given them by making them see as natural inability things which are only a result of an inferior social status, and by persuading them that they owe their social fate…to their individual nature and their lack of gifts. (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 42, original italics)

As Reay (2004) likewise argued, meritocracies convert inequalities into individual, rather than collective, responsibilities. Feinstein et al. (2008) stated that because outcomes for one generation created the opportunity structures for the next, equality of opportunity was inseparable from equality of outcome, so that disparity of outcomes becomes hugely detrimental to equity in the longer term.

AMBIGUITIES IN RESEARCH ON GIFTEDNESS

Margolin’s critique of gifted scholarship raised a key issue with much of the research literature:

Not only are gifted child samples treated as homogeneous, but also findings are regarded as comparable regardless of the measures and procedures employed. In keeping with, and supporting, a model of continuous, linear knowledge development, studies on the gifted are presented as increasingly refined portraits building on the works of
predecessors, whose observations, like their own, are treated as transcontextual and transcultural. (Margolin, 1994, p. 30)

However logically, given arguments that giftedness is a ‘developmental phenomenon, which can rise and fall over time’ (Freeman, 1998a, p. 2), any child might, at any point, demonstrate those qualities which moved them into a group classified as gifted, or out of it. On this construction, if a student were to be labelled as gifted, the label should only be meaningful in a temporary way.

Notwithstanding the current direction of research towards more environmentally-influenced models, the more fixed notion of giftedness was still prevalent in people’s minds because of the ways in which specific tests or models of giftedness hold sway. Freeman noted on the one hand that:

…conventional methods of measurement, notably the IQ test reflecting the old ideas of relatively fixed capacities, are being replaced by measures which aim to distinguish the many components of intelligence. (Freeman, 1998a, p. 5)

But she also stated that, ‘all over the world, a child’s IQ is by far the most widely used measure of giftedness’ (Freeman, 2001, p. 7).

Likewise whilst Gardner’s influential theory of Multiple Intelligences undermined the belief that children were hard-wired with one general level of intelligence, it could be argued that this belief had now largely been replaced with the belief that they came hard-wired with a specific combination of multiple intelligences (White, 2004). Whilst benefiting inclusion, such a view continued to undermine the argument for a socially constructed understanding of giftedness. White suggested that Gardner had confused a range of culturally valued domains with a biological notion of fixed aptitudes.

Nonetheless, as a result of changing conceptions of giftedness, non-diagnostic criteria became an acceptable part of identification processes. Teacher-, parent-, peer- and even self-, nomination have led to an explosion of check-lists of items which could help in the identification of gifted students. But as conceptions of giftedness became broader, check-lists became more all-encompassing, to the extent where it was common to find a long list with many contradictory characteristics on it. Freeman’s (1998a) list of characteristics of gifted underachievers seemed directly to contradict the main ways in which most high achieving children were identified in England today; that is, through school-based tests or in-school performance, and through only one or two criteria which provided a precise cut-off point for those who could be labelled gifted. Montgomery was also concerned that whilst checklists were often useful in guiding teachers’ identification, they could also be ‘restrictive by expecting teachers to categorize students’ performance rather than developing a narrative to describe their overall academic and social profile’ (Montgomery, 1996, cited in Hartas et al., 2008, p. 7).
Our analysis suggested a strong ambivalence towards giftedness within the research community. Freeman epitomized this in her (1998a) review of the literature. While she provided thoughtful and reflective commentary on the dangers of ‘that troublesome word, ‘gifted’” (Freeman, 1998a, p. 1), contradictory assertions set up a counter-dialogue. There were statements which reified the concept, reminding us of its inception as something innate, general and to be highly prized:

If, as the evidence suggests, the intellectually gifted think and learn differently from others, then it is important to teach them appropriately. (Freeman, 1998a, p. 23)

Such contradictions in the research literature pointed to just how difficult it is to create appropriate policy in this area.

**POLICY CONSEQUENCES**

It is not our intention to review recent policy on gifted education in England overall. This has been effectively done elsewhere (e.g., HMI, 1992; Freeman, 1998a; House of Commons, 1999; White, Fletcher-Campbell & Ridley, 2003; Eyre, 2004; Campbell et al., 2005; Neelands et al., 2006; Bailey et al., 2008; Stannard, 2009; Robinson & Campbell, 2010). Rather we want to examine the consequences that the above conceptual ambiguities in the idea of giftedness had for policy formation and implementation. There were three particularly significant such consequences.

**Shifting Identification Criteria**

A substantive problem for teachers in England was the way officially sponsored definitions of giftedness, let alone talent, altered over a short ten year period; mutating from the quantitative models in a 1999 House of Commons Select Committee (the top 2% or 5%) through the range of criteria used by NAGTY (mostly test data measuring cognitive ability), the ‘up to 10%’ of an individual school’s population in the English government’s Excellence in Cities (EiC) programme, the use of performance on national tests at age 11 to create a national ‘register’ of gifted students, to the broad Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) notion of anyone performing in even one subject at a ‘significantly’ (the term was not defined further) higher level than their year group, or with the ‘potential’ (how this is identified was not defined further) to do so. This definitional drift had a post-modern feel to it, as previously strong classification systems loosened into tentativeness. However admirably inclusive these widening portals to giftedness appeared, with such variety of definition, some of it mutually conflicting, teachers might long for the apparent certainty that an IQ used to
Give. Disconcerting though this variety was to practitioners, its explanation, and perhaps its justification, lay in the changing conceptions of giftedness being developed by theorists.

**Giftedness and Socio-Economic Disadvantage**

Educational achievement in England had been associated with socio-economic status ever since the 1944 Education Act came into effect, as longitudinal studies (e.g., Douglas, 1964) had demonstrated. Likewise, performance in intelligence tests has been shown to reflect, to some extent, social class in England, and class and ethnicity in the USA. As the national gifted education programme began to be implemented, considerable interest began to be taken in the social equity dimension. Put briefly this took the form of speculation about hidden giftedness - about whether there were individuals or groups whose giftedness was obscured by the effects of poverty, of poor schooling, or the accidents of high family mobility, adoption or being taken into care. An extreme policy position was reflected in the insistence in the DCSF that giftedness was equally distributed among different social groups, - a form of political correctness without evidence to support it.

Desirable though educational intervention initiatives for improvement are, they need to be based on strong theoretical and evidential bases. There was fairly strong evidence (Campbell et al., 2007a) that giftedness - at least as defined by membership of NAGTY - was not distributed equally amongst social classes, with 44% of members coming from the highest socio-economic group, which comprised 26% of the school population, and 8% from the lowest socio-economic grouping, which comprised some 23%. Identification of talent in the performing arts was even more socially differentiated according to Neelands et al. (2006). Of course, these proportions could be explained by defects in identification process, or by ideologically biased conceptions of giftedness, but they might even be interpreted as partly the result of decades of upward social mobility through education, and the consequent formation of an educational underclass. The more the lack of agreement on theoretical perspectives on giftedness, and the more hold on theorizing social constructivism took, the more these uncertainties in practice persisted.

**Mainstreaming**

The national programme in England was committed to mainstreaming - the idea that most of gifted students’ learning would be provided by the state school system, within the students’ normal school. This normalisation of the idea of giftedness was a distinguishing character of the English programme, contrasting with the specialist programmes in the USA, and the specialist schools in Eastern Europe, for example.
As might be expected there were some difficulties with implementing this approach, not least the voluntary nature of the participation by schools and the perception amongst some teachers that the programme was elitist. However Robinson and Campbell identified the much stronger cultural and systemic barriers to implementation, ignored by the programme:

> These are under-estimation of the strength, and the valuing, of the professional culture in mediating educational change, the strength of those parents and groups with high levels of cultural capital to manipulate educational change to their own children’s advantage, and the power of elite schools, whether independent or state-maintained, to suck many of the most able students out of the mainstream schools. (Robinson & Campbell, 2010, p. 18)

They cited research by Power et al. (2003) that elite independent and grammar schools had created a niche market in gifted education, and argued that it is naïve to assume that state schools could compete with them.

Two cases illustrated the problem sharply. In the first, a girl pupil at a comprehensive school in an urban estate was the only pupil identified as gifted from nearly 2000 students. The school was unable to provide learning to support her needs, which were largely met from people at the evangelical church she attended. In the other case, a highly selective grammar school, with most of its students identified as gifted, provided very high quality teaching in ability sets, ran a full programme of enrichment activities, brokered learning in summer schools and other residential provision specially for gifted students, and had a full programme of engagement with elite universities.

What we saw at work in the mainstreaming policy, was therefore a dysfunction between the democratised conception of giftedness with its equally democratised implementation plan, and the reality of an educational system running along quite different, and incompatible, conceptions of giftedness as the possession of a selective group, needing specialized schooling.

**GIFTEDNESS AND THE FAMILY CONTEXT**

There was an unusually strong consensus in the research literature about the significance of the family for gifted individuals:

> For all high achievers, the most important influence in their lives has almost always been exceptional support and encouragement from their parents. (Freeman, 2001, p. 94)

The American scholar, Campbell, has published a number of parental guides on how to raise a gifted child, and summarized twenty years of research in an article about maximising parental influence (Campbell, J.R., 2007). Leading a
series of international teams who interviewed parents and gifted students across five countries, he coined the term ‘academic home climate’ to capture the behaviour of academically-oriented families, and concluded that when this was allied with the environment of an academic school, the result was high achievement. An academic home climate consisted of a number of family practices, ‘some were messages, others involved strategies, some were beliefs, and still others were family rules’ (Campbell, J.R., 2007, p. 83).

The practices in these families were coded and categorized and the three categories that were mentioned the most were; high expectations, a strong work ethic, and positive family communication.

Winner, also looking at how high ability was best fostered, stated that commitment to education by the parents of a gifted child played an important part in that child’s development:

…what is critical are those cultural values that make education a priority. These values are linked to upper levels of social class and education, but only imperfectly. There are poor and uneducated families who value education and achievement…(Winner, 1996, p. 185)

Winner acknowledged that culturally enriched environments were more likely to be found in middle-class homes, and this, she said, explained the disproportionate level of gifted students from these homes. Gifted children were also likely to have had positive emotional support, parents with high expectations who modelled high achievement in their own working lives, and positive inter-family relationships (Winner, 1996). The normative description of the successful middle-class home might help explain the effect of fostering the abilities of gifted children, but such retrospective studies were more likely to find themselves, almost by default, within a world of achievement supported by socio-economic advantage.

Csikszentmihalyi et al. issued questionnaires to both parents and gifted children in families and concluded that ‘teens from complex families experience and perform productive work with more enjoyable intensity’ (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1996, p. 173). A complex family was defined as one which was both strongly integrated, where members pulled together for stability and support, as well as being strongly differentiated, where members were encouraged to develop individuality through appropriate challenge and opportunity. Csikszentmihalyi et al. claimed that their approach was distinctive in focusing on ‘the quality of experience for understanding what makes a family context effective’ (1996, p. 156):

Few family studies have investigated how children actually feel at home, despite the fact that extensive research into optimal experiences, such as interest, flow, intrinsic motivation, and peak experiences, suggests that how children feel is among the most important influences on whether
they will fully utilize their potential. (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1996, pp. 156–157)

There was some evidence that, for parents, the gifted label became a vehicle capable of carrying a range of emotional problems or demands their children might present them with, as was true for the sample of parents who enrolled their children with The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) (UK) in Freeman’s longitudinal study (2001). Emotional problems associated with giftedness were also reported by Cornell (1983, 1989). However Colangelo and Brower (1987) provided evidence that the negative effect on siblings was a temporary one. Overall there was still surprisingly little work done on the impact of a labelled gifted child on the dynamics of their family as a whole.

Started in 1974, Freeman’s longitudinal study was an exception, and the most far-reaching of its kind in the UK (notwithstanding, given what has been explored, the conceptual and methodological difficulties inherent in attempting to designate a permanently gifted cohort and compare these to a similarly matched, and also permanently non-gifted, control group of students). As mentioned, Freeman said that environmental input played a greater role in the development of a gifted child than it did for other children:

Though genetic endowment cannot be changed, the environmental proportion of an intelligence test score is relatively greater when a child has extra mental power to absorb and make more effective use of information and ideas. (Freeman, 2001, p. 5)

Freeman concluded that the greatest aid to improved educational attainment at school for a child was not parental attitude or high expectations, but rather material provision for learning and parental involvement with their children, ‘this included the way parents behaved, the example they set, and the cultural milieu they provided’ (Freeman, 2001, p. 20).

Along with Freeman, Morawska and Sanders, in one of the most recent studies of optimal parenting for gifted children (2009), said that whilst parents of gifted children had many of the same challenges that all parents faced, they had additional issues to contend with, such as maintaining appropriate expectations of their offspring and confidence in their own abilities to support them.

The way in which students themselves understand giftedness could have a bearing on their academic careers. According to Dweck’s ideal type theory, an entity theory of intelligence, that is the view that intelligence is a fixed trait that cannot be changed, could lead students to seek safe goals where they knew they would perform well as their fragile sense of self made them vulnerable to the fear of failure. In contrast, students who had an incremental theory of giftedness saw it as something that hard work and perseverance fostered, and
as a result such students sought challenge and had more confidence in themselves (Dweck, 1999). Dweck (2000) found a high prevalence of entity theorists among gifted students and that praise from teachers and parents for intelligence (rather than effort, for example), could sustain this and confirm feelings of being special. However, the polarity of entity/incremental theoretical positions was questioned in a recent PhD. thesis (Cadwallader, 2009).

Different cross-cultural conceptions of giftedness within families either increased or decreased the relative effects of nature and nurture. Wu (2008) asserted that the Confucian influence over Chinese culture and society had led to an understanding of giftedness which emphasises hard work and effort over innate ability. Wu’s own qualitative research with five Asian-American families revealed two particularly important themes: that a high level of involvement in a child’s education led to confidence in that child’s future (that is, children’s futures’ could be relatively controllable); and a profound responsibility with respect to being a good parent, so much so that children’s academic achievement was seen as reflective of the level of parental support they received. Wu concluded that:

The implication is parents with children who have average ability can be more optimistic and confident in their children’s future, and they may have more control and influence than they think over their children’s future. (Wu, 2008, p. 121)

Wu’s discussion of Chinese parenting demonstrated that effort and hard work can promote higher levels of academic achievement in that culture, than would otherwise be expected whatever the ability of the child at any given point. This was in contrast to much Western research into giftedness, where the family context focused more on what families could do to best support an already gifted child or infant.

Several studies have also taken an interest in the educational biographies of academically able children. For instance, Power et al. (1999) collected both questionnaire and interview data from a large number of people in their mid-20s who had been identified as gifted at school. They found that beneath the apparent homogeneity of most fulfilling high academic expectations, there was considerable diversity in their pathways and educational experiences, and complex interrelationships between home background and school type:

The translation of educational promise into educational success was rarely easy or straightforward, irrespective of socioeconomic background or the kind of school attended. (Power et al., 1999, p. 330)

They stated that this diversity in the generally successful pathways of academically able students had received little attention, and that rational choice theory did not sufficiently explain the decisions and perceptions of this group of successful students.
Although it may appear that the majority of our pupils acted 'rationally' in choosing the prime trajectory from school to work, family and school expectations were often so strong as to make any decision to do otherwise almost literally unthinkable. (Power et al., 1999, p. 337)

However, the family itself was rarely the unit of analysis in studies by researchers on giftedness, and so conclusions like those of Power et al., were easy to overlook.

A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE NEUROLOGICAL TUNNEL?

Some of the preceding uncertainty and debate might well be rendered anachronistic by recent developments in neuroscience. We provide examples of work in this area popularized by two American journalists, Coyle and Shenk, who have reviewed the findings of leading edge researchers. Despite acknowledging that the research field is in its infancy, Coyle claimed that talent, in any field of endeavour, could be explained in part by myelin - an insulation that:

wraps nerve fibres in the brain and thereby increases signal strength, speed and accuracy. The more we fire a particular circuit, the more myelin optimizes that circuit and the stronger, faster and more fluent our movements and thoughts become. (Coyle, 2012, p. 32)

What was therefore required for the development of talent is not a highly heritable g factor, but hours and hours of ‘deep practice’ to build up the myelin and thereby improve performance. Drawing on Ericsson’s research (Ericsson, 1996; Ericsson et al., 2006) Coyle produced, ‘something approaching a universal theory of skill that can be summed up in a temptingly concise equation: deep practice x 10,000 hours = world class skill’ (Coyle, 2012, p. 54). Surveying historical and biographical research, he sought to demonstrate that genius could also be explained by this formula, using studies of clustering of genius at particular periods in Athens, Florence and England, and case studies of individual geniuses such as Michelangelo, Mozart, the Brontës and others.

Such research is at an early stage, and, like Howe’s (1997) work in England mentioned below, it was subjected to the criticism (Freeman, forthcoming 2012) that practice cannot explain early precocity. Yet should myelin studies in the neuroscientific field turn out as Coyle predicted, giftedness would have to be understood as a radically environmental expression.

However, adopting any position which calls to mind the nature versus nurture distinction was critiqued by Shenk, based on the evidence of a group of geneticists, neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists. Shenk demonstrated how these ‘interactionists’ refuted any simple notion of genetic heredity, as genes did not function as autonomous units. Instead of the static model of
genes + environment, where each was considered to be measurable as a discrete entity, a new developmental model suggested that a much more dynamic process of genes x environment was closer to the reality:

There is no genetic foundation that gets laid before the environment enters in; rather, genes express themselves strictly in accordance with their environment...We do not inherit traits directly from our genes. Instead, we develop traits through the dynamic process of gene-environment interaction. (Shenk, 2010, p. 18)

Shenk described how genetic inheritance was a far more complicated process than simple Mendelian genetics had led us to believe, with a minimal amount of genetic diversity potentially able to create a huge variety of genetic expression, as a result of individual environmental circumstances influencing that genetic expression from the very moment of conception and continuing to do so throughout our lives. Shenk therefore argued that resulting developmental features could not, in any meaningful way, be broken back down to their genetic components and this was most true for the most complex of traits – such as intelligence:

The step-by-step distance between a gene and a trait will depend on the complexity of the trait. The more complex the trait, the farther any one gene is from direct instruction. (Shenk, 2010, p. 22)

At this stage, we draw attention to such studies for two reasons. Firstly because of their potential influence on research into giftedness in their own right and secondly because such evidence should reinforce the importance of interdisciplinarity in the field. Sociological arguments which foreground the environmental aspects of the development of giftedness appear to dovetail with emerging scientific evidence. This not only enriches the research base, but may help to move the field beyond some of the difficulties and contradictions which have riddled it since its inception.

CONCLUSION

We have shown above how research on giftedness ran with a series of fundamental ambiguities at its core. Whilst it focused on tightening definitions and identification criteria, it simultaneously aimed to achieve social equity through the incorporation of newer multi-variant, flexible models of giftedness. It was not surprising, therefore, to find that conceptions of giftedness were ambivalent and problematic outside the research community, because this value-uncertainty was unresolved within it. We are reminded of Smith’s (2006b) ascription of the problem to the shift from structural, reductionist models of intelligence to constructivist, holistic ones.

The current educational landscape and popular conceptions of what giftedness means were shaped by the history of research on intelligence, whilst
current policy and political rhetoric aimed to present giftedness in a quite different way, removed from the legacies of its past. However contradictions both in implicit and explicit conceptions of giftedness suggested that its historical legacy had not been shed. Giftedness was a Janus-faced concept.

Some researchers, such as Howe, argued that ‘in the right circumstances almost anyone can produce exceptional skills’ (Howe, 1990, p. 62). If there is even a possibility that this was correct, the process of identifying gifted children was at least partly about identifying those whose circumstances had favoured them to develop in this way. From here it was difficult not to conclude that the outcome of identifying gifted children would indeed be part of the same reproduction of middle-class values and cultural capital that had driven most Western education systems over the last century.

However, there was also much resistance to Howe’s assertion. A paper by Howe et al. (1998) in Behavioral and Brain Sciences which questioned the presence of innate talent was subjected to a barrage of responses from proponents of gifted education defending it. Freeman’s response (1998b) cited how some infants could be seen to read, speak, or perform calculations earlier than their peers. What is notable here was the strong motivation of some to see a minority of children as already potentially gifted at birth, and therefore by implication, others as never so potentially gifted, as they did not possess the prerequisite innate ability.

Both Borland, writing as a critic of education programmes for gifted children, and Freeman, writing as a proponent of them, offered assessments of a turning tide. Older conceptions of giftedness were being replaced by more inclusive, flexible ones. However these assessments of developments in the field were not fully borne out in the way that the national programme of gifted and talented education was implemented in England. Nor, as we shall show, were they visible in the implicit conceptions of giftedness held by the family members analysed in Chapters 4 - 7, (except possibly that their understanding of the need for hard work resonated with Coyle’s deep practice). Instead, the families grappled with the conception of giftedness Freeman had claimed was behind us. The aspiration to a more holistic theory of giftedness remained permeated by its historical roots. From an English perspective, gifted and talented policy worked with a conception of ability as evenly distributed in the population. In doing so, it was adopting an ahistorical approach, turning a blind eye to the legacy of a selective education system.

Krisjansen and Lapins offered a similar assessment of the national policy drive in Australia:

…the policy is susceptible to two readings made in contrary directions, one equitable and democratic, the other hierarchical and elitist. The former, in fact, becomes an alibi for sustaining the latter. (Krisjansen & Lapins, 2001, p. 55)
CHAPTER 1

This equity – excellence debate was at the heart of the contradictions in much gifted educational research, yet was rarely scrutinized from a sociological or a historical approach by specialists in gifted education. As Kincheloe (1999) argued, educational psychology broadly failed to acknowledge its social embeddedness. (We examine possibilities for such research in Chapter 10.) But the shifting tide of opinion about giftedness is not just an educational, psychological or sociological issue. It is also a moral one, with a profound bearing upon how the educational system, and the teachers and parents in it, should treat children as they develop.
CHAPTER 2

STUDYING THE FAMILY

FAMILY CULTURE AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT: THE RISK OF DETERMINISM

Much educational research established that students’ family contexts influenced their educational outcomes. Work particularly focused on social class as mediating these outcomes. It was demonstrated that there was a disparity between the achievement-oriented values of the school, including language use, directed to the future, allied to what were more likely to be middle-class values, and the more collectivist, family and peer-group oriented values of working class students, which tended to be less future-oriented (e.g., Bernstein, 1973; Marjoribanks, 2002).

Pioneering work in this field was carried out by Douglas (1964), who pointed out how interested and supportive parents could bridge gaps between home and school cultures. The importance of the home culture was demonstrated by Douglas’s analysis of maternal desires and expectations, through his use of in-depth interviews with different family members. After accounting for ability, class and geographical area, those children whose mothers wanted them to go to grammar (i.e., selective) school received 11% more places than expected, those whose mothers were undecided, 8% fewer places than expected, and those whose mothers wanted them to go to secondary modern (i.e., non-selective) school, 60% fewer places than expected.

The Plowden Report (1967) confirmed the importance of home factors, in explaining how attainment rates varied. It particularly emphasized the role of attitudes, interest and encouragement, over and above material conditions. Musgrove (1966) suggested that the more open a society was, that is, the more social mobility was a possibility (if not an actuality), the more parental influence mattered, and consequently the more parents invested in their children’s education. He also argued that family influence superseded school or peer influence, so much so that even socially mobile children did not develop values deeply at odds with their parents, at least while at school. This being the case, it was clear that a socially mobile child was more likely to come from a family where there was already a culture of valuing education and aspiration. Jackson and Marsden’s (1966) study of education and the working class found that despite experiencing upward mobility, respondents tended to define themselves in terms of the class they had come from.
More recent research confirmed these seminal findings. Feinstein et al., (2004, 2008) drawing on large bodies of statistical data, such as the National Child Development Study and the British Cohort Study, found that parental interest and involvement were the key variables in a child’s educational attainment, over and above material deprivation per se. They concluded that parental beliefs, values, aspirations and attitudes had the most impact on the inter-generational transmission of educational success and failure. Likewise, a literature review, (Desforges, 2003) for the government’s Department for Education and Science (DfES) considered the research findings on the relationship between parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement. In reviewing all the significant large-scale quantitative studies, it found that the extent and form of parental involvement were strongly influenced by social class, maternal level of education and health, and material deprivation. In addition to social class, health and poverty, the extent of a parent’s involvement was influenced by the perception of their role and their confidence in fulfilling it, largely mediated by their relationship to schools and education. Desforges argued that it was crucial to understand what was happening in successful parental involvement and offered the following summary of the evidence:

…the impact of parental involvement arises from parental values and educational aspirations and that these are exhibited continuously through parental enthusiasm and positive parenting style. These in turn are perceived by the student and, at best, internalized by them. This has its impact on the student’s self perception as a learner and on their motivation, self esteem and educational aspirations. By this route parental involvement frames how students perceive education and school work and bolsters their motivation to succeed. (Desforges, 2003, p. 35, para. 4.11)

It was also particularly interesting to note the finding that parental involvement was strongly positively influenced by the child’s level of attainment, that is, the more a child achieved, the more parents got involved.

The Relative Impotence of Schooling

Some findings of relevance to these English studies were reported in the USA (e.g., Coleman et al., 1966, and Jencks et al., 1972), and used to illustrate the power imbalance between society (including the economy, linguistic and cultural capital residing in families, and the moral order) on one hand, and schooling on the other. The most pessimistic analyses, educationally speaking, came in England from Musgrove (1971) who saw schools as ‘impotent’ to achieve educational goals and from Katz in the USA, who concluded:
It is clear that the powers of schooling have been vastly overrated. Despite substantial funding and a captive audience, the schools have not been able to attain the goals set for them, with remarkably little change, for the last century and a quarter. (Katz, 1975, p. 142)

A major problem arising from these findings was that of sociological determinism - if these findings were general, how could we explain the significant minority of children brought up in poverty, and in homes lacking educational aspiration, who succeeded in education? Moreover, politically, how could increased expenditure on what has sometimes been called compensatory education be justified, if it appeared to have such little impact on children living in poverty? These assessments served to emphasize the very high significance of family culture in understanding children’s educational achievement. This holds just as true, we contend, for high achievers as for others.

Bourdieu, Cultural Capital and Habitus

Bourdieu argued that education played a key role in the way that capitalist societies reproduced themselves and he shifted the arena of class from production to social relations generally. His theory of cultural capital linked class to culture, but more importantly, also to social relations. Bourdieu and Passeron stated that culture should not be severed from its function, which was social reproduction, ‘that is, to ignore the specific effect of symbolic relations in the reproduction of power relations’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, pp. 10–11). Because of his ideas, it has become difficult to consider how middle class values are reproduced through the education system without having some notion of cultural capital:

…the transmission of cultural capital is no doubt the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital, and it therefore receives proportionately greater weight in the system of reproduction strategies, as the direct, visible forms of transmission tend to be more strongly censored and controlled. (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 19)

The diffuse, continuous transmission of cultural capital within the family escaped observation and control, so that attainment in the education system seemed to be based on mainly innate abilities. Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital took three forms:

- the embodied state, that is long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body which require an investment of time personally by the investor;
- the objectified state, that is cultural goods (paintings, books, instruments, etc.) which can be appropriated materially, and which presupposes economic capital, and cultural capital; and,
the institutionalized state, that is educational qualifications, which are formally independent of their bearer and provide evidence of the power of instituting, that is imposing recognition (Bourdieu, 2004).

For Bourdieu, cultural capital was to be seen in conjunction with the other forms of capital that circulated in society; primarily social capital, the social networks between families and wider society, and economic capital. For instance, possessing cultural goods becomes effective capital only if appropriated by agents and invested as a stake in competition.

Through the notion of habitus, an individual was to be understood as embodying not only culture, but also his or her own personal history, and that of the whole family or class to which they belonged. Nash said about habitus that it, ‘enables individual trajectories to be studied, for habitus has a history and discloses the traces of its origins in practice’ (Nash, 1999, p. 176). Bourdieu’s definition of habitus suggested why it was logical to consider the relationship of class to education over time, and through extended family networks. His concept of habitus attempted to overcome the dualism between structure and agency (Reay, 1998) and his stance towards class moved the debate beyond static models of class categorization by socio-economic status.

Nevertheless, Bourdieu was also somewhat deterministic with respect to his adherence to the logic of the process of internalization, despite his desire to create a theory that moved away from the determinism of structuralism. Based on psychological research, Bourdieu asserted that individual aspirations were, ‘essentially determined by reference to the probability (judged intuitively by means of previous successes or failures) of achieving the desired goal’ (Bourdieu, 1974, pp. 34–35). A major critique of Bourdieu was that he had no account of why the internalisation of habitus was relative, in the sense that not everyone growing up in the same class or family would adopt the same practices. So where Bourdieu provided a concept of culture that allowed the principles of how structure was internalized and reproduced, he was unable to explain individual processes which worked against such a principle (Nash, 1999). Realizing advantage must depend on individual differences, and any theory of cultural capital would always be limited, without a theory of individual difference.

*Beyond Bourdieu*

Feinstein et al. (2008) drew attention to social class influences before schooling:

Evidence for the UK indicates that the social class gradient kicks in significantly before children enter school,...suggesting that family
contexts are particularly important in explaining educational disadvantage. (Feinstein et al., 2008, p. 15)

This echoed Bourdieu:

The success of all school education, and more generally of all secondary pedagogic work, depends fundamentally on the education previously accomplished in the earliest years of life, even and especially when the educational system denies this primacy in its ideology and practice by making the school career a history with no pre-history. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 43)

Whilst their evidence supported a correlation between parental education (in number of years) and many aspects of family life, such as household structure, income, neighbourhood, and age of mother, Feinstein et al. attempted to confront the issue of determinism; they argued that correlation could not be taken as implying causation. Even where direct causation could be established, this was in itself useless without understanding the process and context in which it operated. An essential aspect of education was that it mediated and moderated other factors, and so an approach hoping to better understand intergenerational educational transmission needed to make a range of processes explicit, and not just to posit broad, abstract categories like capitals. In this way, Feinstein et al. were drawing from Bourdieu, but positing a way of going beyond the deterministic elements of his approach. For instance, they highlighted how children from disadvantaged backgrounds might show higher levels of motivation if they viewed themselves as able in school, based on parental expectations and aspirations, regardless of how accurate this assessment was:

There is therefore a need to understand the relevant contexts surrounding expectations and how these either impede or facilitate successful follow-through. Such results highlight the importance of studying ‘person-in-context’ interactions, as what applies in one group might not necessarily fit the dynamics of another. (Feinstein et al., 2008, p. 85)

Feinstein et al. demonstrated how complex causality was, in that aspirations both drove success, and were likely to grow in response to it. However, the position was even more complex than they suggested. The dominant emphasis on parental attitude, involvement and family culture, strong as it was in the research over at least 50 years, had to be re-evaluated in the light of the conclusions in The Spirit Level (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010), which stressed the influence of material factors, reflected in income inequalities in society as a whole, on educational attainment. Their conclusions, which applied cross-culturally, suggested that, however important in explaining individual attainment, parental attitudes and cultures had a prior, material source, especially when explaining national educational performance.
CHAPTER 2

Family and Social Mobility

Education is becoming an increasingly significant driver of social mobility...Studies show that around 38% of inter-generational social mobility can be explained by observable educational factors. (The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 1999, p. 18)

The Oxford Mobility Study (Goldthorpe, 1987) provided evidence of some absolute social mobility, related to the growth of professional jobs since the 1950s, but little change in relative social mobility or class differentials, which might come with increased educational opportunity, viewed by Goldthorpe as his indicator of the degree of openness of a society. Goldthorpe incorporated a number of structured interviews in his otherwise quantitative approach, and from these discovered that there was a wide diversity in the meanings which mobility carried for individuals. He found:

...individual, or perhaps family, attributes which were seen as crucial to the educational or occupational success that the respondent had actually obtained...attributes which had enabled him to take advantage of the opportunities that existed. (Goldthope, 1987, p. 232)

However, a model which could demonstrate general processes would never completely account for, or predict, how cultural capital was realized at an individual level. Goldthorpe confined himself to a study of absolute class mobility rates over time, and individual variation (genetic, moral and social) was only seen to be of importance if one was interested in equality of opportunity at an individual, rather than a structural, level. Goldthorpe was also heavily criticized for using male socio-economic status as a proxy for family status.

Transmission of Values and Beliefs

For the French sociologist, Bertaux, ‘mobility is as much a matter of family praxis as individual agency, for it is families which produce and rear individuals’ (Bertaux & Thompson, 1997, p. 7). Bertaux referred to anthroponomic production as the process which socialised children into adults and this implied nurturing both physical development and cultural and psychic energy. For Bertaux, families differed not only in the resources they had to support these, but in how they chose to use them and deploy their time. These choices were informed by the moral and emotional framework that bound families and not just, as Bertaux accused Bourdieu of positing, self-interest governed by rational choice (Bertaux & Thompson, 1997). Bertaux believed that the effort to transmit subjective resources such as values, beliefs, skills and culture from one generation to the next was the key to understanding family dynamics and the genesis of identity; therefore Bourdieu’s focus on the
transmission of objective capital in families could be misleading and direct researchers away from the more intangible, but nonetheless important goals of inter-generational transmission:

...the family remains the main channel for the transmission of language, names, land and housing, local social standing, and religion; and beyond that also of social values and aspirations, fear, world views, domestic skills, taken-for-granted ways of behaving, attitudes to the body, models of parenting and marriage…” (Bertaux & Thompson, 1993, p. 1)

Bertaux and Thompson argued that the content of what was transmitted between generations, ‘is loaded with psychological meanings: with projections and identifications, love and anger, symbols and desires.’ (Bertaux & Thompson, 1993, p. 7). They demonstrated how family culture was essentially a conservative and cohesive force, rather than a dynamic one, and the larger and more geographically rooted a family was, the more this would be the case. The family case studies that Bertaux and Thompson (1993) and Bertaux and Delcroix (2000), undertook demonstrated that it was not only formal education that mattered with respect to social mobility, but crucially, also the trans-generational family culture with respect to it, or in other words, the way in which people valued, and thought about, education. Schneider and Stevenson (1999) also, in a large-scale American study of young people, showed how family relationships were crucial in supporting educational and career ambitions. Unlike other comparable studies, theirs emphasized the internal processes of family dynamics, rather than demographic and socioeconomic aspects.

**Home – School Relations: The Role of Cultural Capital**

The relationship that families have with their children’s schools can be crucial in supporting or hindering their investment in and attitudes to their own child’s education. A body of research on the relationships of families to their children’s schools, aimed to analyse what constituted positive relationships and how these could be fostered, since they were linked to school performance (e.g., Wolfendale, 1989; Vincent, 1996; Reay, 1998). Reay’s (1998) threefold classification of home education is helpful here:

- compensatory – for instance private tuition such as in Black Saturday schools;
- complementary – such as helping with homework set by school;
- modificatory – that is persuadeing the school to modify something.

Each of these required different levels of confidence and investment and Reay concluded that middle-class mothers’ investment was intended to guarantee
success, whereas working-class mothers’ hopes and dreams were relatively ephemeral in practice.

The impact of a parent’s own educational history on how they related to their child’s schooling was picked up in some of this home – school literature. Bryans said, ‘The main problem is that many parents’ expectations of school are shaped by their own experience of having been pupils themselves’ (in Wolfendale, 1989, p. 36). Reay (1998) found that because teachers, male partners, and mothers themselves, perceived the mother as being the person responsible for their child’s behaviour, many women found it difficult to disentangle themselves emotionally from their children’s school performance. One mother Reay interviewed, with a child at a working-class inner city primary school, said:

I find it really difficult helping Leigh with his work...I’m the wrong person for it because I’m already angry in myself because of my education and how that sort of progressed, and all the problems I had to go through, all the embarrassment and humiliation. (Reay, 1998, p. 78)

Reay used Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital because it allowed for the incorporation of the psychological aspects of women’s involvement in schooling, for instance, exploring confidence, ambivalence or a sense of inadequacy. She argued that there was a disjuncture for many working class women between an educational field and their habitus. From her study of the mothers in two primary schools, she concluded that lower incomes and fewer educational qualifications did not necessarily indicate lower levels of involvement in children’s education, but did mean less effective practices in being able to relate to schools and support education. She argued that middle-class mothers were engaged in replicating habitus, whereas working-class mothers had the harder task of transforming it.

Reay was critical of accounts of home-school relationships, such as those by Wolfendale (1989) which presented a genderless parent. This echoed critiques of Goldthorpe’s approach to social mobility which defined family status by male socio-economic status. As Reay said, the absence of women in such major studies was paradoxical given the demonstrated impact of mothers on their children’s educational attainment. Lareau (1989) also stressed that it was particularly the investment of mothers’ familial cultural capital in schooling which led to educational outcomes for children. Vincent (1996) meanwhile, was critical of the consensual language employed in discussions of home-school relationships, such as ‘partnership’ and ‘dialogue’, saying that this rhetoric masked underlying inequalities and tensions. Ball (2006) was also critical of the homogenisation of home-school relationships through the rhetoric of partnership, because this failed properly to account for great differences in pupil and family cultures, and thereby individual modes of agency.
Similarly, Lareau (1989) demonstrated that working-class family-school relationships were characterized by sporadic engagement and the feeling of education being separate from school, whilst middle-class relationships were more enduring and characterized by feelings of interconnectedness. However Lareau, like Reay, concluded that parental values regarding education could not be read from their levels of engagement alone, and middle class parents in her study did not differ sufficiently in their attitudes to education to account for their different patterns of behaviour. In Lareau’s study, it was differing levels of educational confidence and competence which did correlate, although social class and the cultural capital this provided had to be activated by parents, thereby retaining a notion of individual variability. Whilst Lareau believed that Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital provided a conceptual bridge between structural determinants and individual biographies, it was inadequate to demonstrate the micro-level interactional processes through which class dispositions became activated into capital. In her view, it was too easy to use Bourdieu’s work in a way that confused the possession of cultural capital with the realization of social advantage. Crucially, Lareau found that even when parents invested their cultural capital similarly, they realized different profits depending on individual context:

What is needed is a more contextually based analysis of the stages of cultural transformation in the educational process. (Lareau, 1989, p. 179)

Families in an Educational Market Place

Understanding of the relationship between the family context and education was improved by work on education as a market place. Ball (2006) claimed that this market place commodified and individualized children, so that parents and families became the architects of their children’s biographies and abilities, later to be realized in terms of social advantage. The resources and skills which aided this parental activity were unequally distributed in the population. Ball quoted Bourdieu and Boltanski who claimed that, ‘The education market has become one of the most important loci of class struggle’ (Bourdieu & Boltanski, 2000, p. 917, cited in Ball, 2006, p. 157).

Ball summarized the realm of middle-class practices which drove educational achievement, ‘as the composite productions of families, which at times involved enormous emotional exertions and capital expenditures – rather than as either a natural or an individual phenomenon’ (Ball, inaugural lecture, 2003). Ball provided evidence that working class parents’ choices of secondary schools were contingent rather than open decisions, often constrained by family and locality, while the school choices for middle class children often determined the geographical location and household roles in families. This reading asserted that school choice in working class families was ‘not a matter of cultural deficit’, rather ‘pragmatic accommodation’ (Ball, 2006, p. 163),
whereas school choice in middle class families was very much based on the reality of the educational marketplace, where choices could be made, based on school performance indicators, for instance. Ball argued for a more critical understanding of how many middle-class families sequestered those social advantages which were not universally available.

Gewirtz, while being critical of approaches that oriented the working class families toward middle class values, offered a picture of how successful parents operated in a neo-liberal education marketplace by defining four sets of attributes that middle class parents usually possessed and which aided the performance of their children in school:

- they are active consumers in the education marketplace;
- they monitor and closely police what schools provide, intervening when necessary to rectify any shortcomings;
- they possess and transmit appropriate forms of cultural capital; and,
- they possess a good deal of social capital – i.e. the social contacts, networks and self-confidence that enable them to exploit the education system to their children’s best advantage (Gewirtz, 2001, p. 367).

THE CONTRIBUTION OF FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

The sorts of studies discussed so far, which considered, broadly, the influence of family background on educational attainment, often did so by taking it for granted that there was ‘a family background’ for each pupil which could be named and subjected to analysis. However, other more sociologically-inflected approaches saw a re-analysis of the family’s relationship to school performance by according a more complex and dynamic structure to the family in order to explore what processes were implied in successful parenting.

Family systems theory in psychology had a profound effect on the study of the family across a number of disciplines. Initially, the psychiatrist Jackson (1957) developed a model of mutual inter-relationship between family members based on the fact that improvement in one of his patients would frequently be accompanied by deterioration in another family member. This was the foundation of interactional analysis. Hill (1971) was subsequently one of the early architects of the family system, which he defined as a bounded structure of social positions or roles, and the activities in which those members engaged, monitored and controlled through a feedback loop, and stabilized over time. Crucially, in any systemic view, the whole was not identical to the sum of the parts.

The idea of the family as a system provided academics and practitioners with a useful intellectual framework within which to approach family problems, and suggested tools for intervention. It facilitated work on the family, rather than the individual, as the unit of analysis. The idea of circular causality led to a shift away from viewing individuals as the isolated
protagonists of problematic situations. The meaning of behaviour could be construed as residing not just in the beliefs or intentions of individuals, but in the configurations of relationships in the group and within its gestalt. In this way, systems theory highlighted a particular distinction between the content and process of family interactions, which were related but certainly not identical, and which were regulated by a family’s belief systems (Dallos, 1991). For the family therapist, Dallos, people in families were engaged in the construction of a social reality involving three related aspects; behaviours, beliefs and emotions:

These are linked together so that families attempt to make sense of their world, to ascribe meanings to their own and to each other’s actions and in doing so to construct a repertoire of choices. (Dallos, 1991, p. 14)

The systems approach, although with its own shortcomings, opened up a space for theorizing which linked behaviour to beliefs and emotions not just at the level of the individual. The conceptual framework of a bounded system enabled family therapy to develop the idea of a family’s belief system, defined as a family’s way of knowing and understanding its world (Burnham, 1988). This framework, which was dynamic rather than static, maintained family equilibrium and was formed by, and in turn sustained, patterns of behaviour, although, of course, within the paradigm there were conflicting views and voices:

…a family may hold a set of beliefs that it is important and valuable to be fully educated, widely read and interested in academic and cultural matters. Coupled with this they may regard people who avoid education as ignorant or to be pitied because of their lack of intelligence. Now it is unlikely that every person in the family will whole-heartedly endorse such a set of beliefs. However, it is likely that education will be a highly salient issue for all of the members. In fact the topic of education may act as a sort of trigger which activates a range of family processes...It can represent the area in which various struggles are conducted. (Dallos, 1991, pp. 21–22)

The concept of the family belief system had particular strengths. Byng-Hall (1979, 1995) built on the idea of a family belief system and a life script as used by transactional analysts, to conceive of family mythology and a family script. Family mythology consisted of shared family images and stories which continued to give the family an identity and also function to repudiate unmanageable aspects of both family life and wider society (Byng-Hall, 1979). Byng-Hall used the idea of the family script to describe how members of a family repeated sequences of behaviour, which were imbued with emotion and thereby became engrained in their own unique script. What was particularly significant was that family scripts were handed down through generations via family customs.
The idea of a family script with both a synchronic and a diachronic quality moved family therapy beyond a focus on either current behavioural patterns, or historical legacies, to the way in which these interacted. It had much in common with biographical methods in social science and with methods which, often influenced by constructivist theories, informed narrative modes of data analysis. Byng-Hall stated that family stories about the past were necessary in order for the new generation to differentiate themselves from their parents. This resonates with Bertaux and Thompson’s (1997) sociological analysis of intergenerational transmission where they observed that whilst a generation was highly influenced by its forebears, transmission was more likely to lead to children adopting similar, rather than identical, roles and attitudes in life.

Narrative and life history research recognised the importance of family scripts, and the diachronic as well as the synchronic nature of family dynamics which carried a high degree of emotional investment:

…one’s own life history should be considered as developing against a backdrop of the family history active over several generations. In our own lives, we not only solve current problems, but also take on family delegations from our parents’ generation, and in particular from that of our grandparents. These delegations are especially effective when we are not aware of them. We are driven on by them without knowing and are often blocked by them. (Rosenthal, 1997, p. 24)

Critiques of systems theory abound. Family therapy tended to isolate the family system from history and wider society, delivering a behavioural understanding of reality with patterned interactions (Poster, 1978). As Poster said, systems theory did not save behaviourism from its deterministic tendencies. Gubrium and Holstein (1990) criticised the presentation of the family as a ‘super personality’ representing the group, since there were likely to be conflicting voices. Gubrium and Holstein’s familial reality was produced in discourse, and offered, ‘a view of family as a socially constituted object, a product of decidedly public actions and interactions.’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990, p. 12). It questioned the assumptions underlying the private image of the family, its boundedness and distinct domestic order within which authentic knowledge was supposed to reside. Rather the family was viewed as a collective representation meaningfully revealed in discourse.

Although we recognise the value of the above perspectives in understanding family cultures, we question the extreme constructionist tendency to eschew completely the importance of structural family ties. However, the overriding strength of the social constructionist approach taken by Gubrium and Holstein was that there was a culturally conceived whole brought into the particular context of individual lives – family was conveyed as an interactive social organisation – that was a ‘common configuration of concern’, but in a particular familial context (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990, p. 155).
Beyond Structural-Functionalism

Sociological definitions of the family used to work at a predominantly structural and/or functional level of analysis, with units of kinship, or production (e.g., Parsons, 1964), more likely to approach the family as a normative, static object, labelling its structural, economic and demographic characteristics, rather than considering the internal relationships or processes that inform the attributes under consideration. Various critical theories (Marxist, feminist or post-modern) demonstrated how these static models of family served to maintain or hide structural inequalities between generations, genders, or different socio-economic groups, in part a function of the public – private dualism which saw families as bounded systems and sidelined the importance of external constraints and social contexts (Cheal, 1991). Much current sociological literature suggested that we should be wary of the kinds of generalizations about family life which were dependent on viewing it as a unit of analysis which was comparable with other similar units. Rather it was the very specificity of families in their own unique and diverse contexts, with their own unique coalescences of individuals and relationships, which should take precedence over, or at least complement, more reductive structural analyses.

Contemporary definitions were more likely to focus on what a family did, and incorporate flexibility into models of what a family was, in an attempt to eschew normative and socio-culturally specific prescriptions of what a family should be, or do (Morgan, 1996; Jagger & Wright, 1999; Cheal, 2002; Croll, 2004; Smart, 2007). One of the most influential sociologists of family life, Morgan, suggested that when the experiences of individuals were taken into account, family life was not only about relationships between kin, but also all sorts of other aspects of life, such as hospital waiting lists and the size of classrooms. It therefore seemed essential to allow space for such issues to come to light in more phenomenologically-oriented work with families.

There was some consensus amongst sociologists that formal family ties and the formal obligations that went along with these had become less restrictive, ‘…contemporary individuals are participating in the emergence of a flexible culture, which emphasizes the psychology of personal relations instead of inherited traditions.’ (Cheal, 1988, p. 34). Finch’s (1989) work on family obligations maintained that individuals drew on a set of guidelines when considering family obligations, rather than rules. The complexity of diverse, flexible, situated lives meant that individuals interpreted family ties for themselves in an ongoing process of negotiation. The move to considering family dynamics and processes from within necessitated taking seriously the emotions inherent in such group dynamics.
CHAPTER 2

Family Practices

Morgan (1996) highlighted the emotional aspect of family practices. Referring to family obligations, he argued that there was a caring nexus which was both constituted by, and constitutive of, family relationships. Therefore, it was important to be able to include this ‘emotional labour’ in sociological analyses. Morgan (1996) stressed that a family consisted of its individuals with their own life trajectories, and the relationship between those individuals, which was a unique dynamic those individuals created and were created by. ‘Family practices’, according to Morgan, was a concept which incorporated the differing aspects of what the single noun ‘family’ could not; the idea of the regularity of everyday life, alongside historical and cultural contingencies. Family practices were informed by relevant individual biographies, but which were both constituted and shaped by social and cultural life, thereby breaking down the private / public distinction. Morgan’s perspective was that different lenses could be used to consider family life, so that family practices could also be gender practices, or class practices, or age practices. Such a perspective militated against the tendency to reify the notion of family so that it occluded other related aspects of life:

…family life is never simply family life…it is always continuous with other areas of existence. The points of overlap and connection are often more important than the separate entities, understood as work, family, politics and so on. (Morgan, 1999, p. 13)

The Rise of Individualism

Giddens (1991), Beck-Gernsheim (2002), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Bauman (2001) maintained that at the root of contemporary family life was an individualism which was not possible to realize in recent history, when family life was more confined by ties of obligation. Romantic love, individual self-determination and self-interest or mutual benefit were now the drivers behind new family configurations. Beck went as far as to say that the field of enquiry into the family was dead and incapable of grasping current relationships. However theirs was not a view universally shared and many researchers highlighted that ‘part of the reflexiveness of modern life is the explicit monitoring of one’s own routine practices against some standard of normality’ (Morgan 1999, p. 19).

Whilst there was consensus around the idea that structural constraints to conform to normative family values, both internal and external, had now lessened, studies such as those by Finch (1989) and Finch and Mason (1993) highlighted the fact that whilst family practices had become more diverse, individuals in families were still influenced by moral guidelines that they perceived as being external to them. Smart (2007), whilst acknowledging that
the field of family research needed to be injected with new theoretical ideas, was critical of what she called the ‘individualization thesis’ and posited her ‘connectedness thesis’ as an alternative more capable of describing people’s lives as they felt they were actually lived.

**Negotiated Moralities**

Finch carried out empirical work asking in what sense families were governed by obligation, and what place morality played in family relationships. Finch found that the concept of negotiation was useful in understanding shared family behaviour, since it carried with it a sense of situated practice and structural constraints, the possibility of implicit and explicit negotiations, and unequal power relations between those involved:

…the process of selecting and applying normative guidelines should not be seen as individual activity, but as a process of developing shared understandings with other people in a particular context of kin support. (Finch, 1989, p. 184)

Finch’s work, alongside Morgan’s, highlighted how every negotiation between family members drew upon a history of particular relationships and commitments in that family, and also anticipated a future. The outcome of these negotiated commitments was not only the family’s practices and behaviours, but also the moral identities of the individuals it was composed of, since these were, in part, shaped through the group’s shared commitments over time, as moral identity was tied up with reputation. Finch therefore claimed that:

…the distinctive feature of kin relationships properly can be described as an issue of morality, which puts relationships with kin on a different basis from those with other people. (Finch, 1989, p. 236)

But this was not a morality defined by prescriptive rules, rather it was influenced by guidelines interpreted in the collective actions of the family group. This led to a more complex definition of family responsibilities than a set of prescriptive behaviours or obligations. The meanings that behaviour conveyed to others in a group was more important, or certainly potentially different from, individual beliefs or assertions about that behaviour. Similarly, Morgan (2002) identified a ‘moral turn’ in family studies ushered in by Finch and others, whereby it was recognised that family practices involved the moral evaluation of choices.

Ribbens McCarthy et al., (2003) reasserted how pivotal the notion of ‘family’ was: ‘The discourse of ‘family’ is a key concept by which people themselves understand their lives…’ (2003, p. 27). This was an important point. Whilst some theorists (e.g., Gubrium & Holstein, 1990) were critical of
the reification of family, cultural discourse tended to constitute it as if it were coherent and bounded, more akin to the systems theory of family life critiqued for these very reasons. Without accounting for the emotional work that the term ‘family’ did, for instance, in providing security and connectedness, academic theorizing could quickly lose touch with the lived experience of family life. As David and colleagues put it:

In observed academically-analysed reality, a bounded private sphere may not exist, but the domain may well do so in feelings and in people’s understandings and explanations of their lives. (David et al., 1993, p. 22)

Smart (2007), developed an original and nuanced sociological account of the family, reformulated as the sphere of ‘personal life’. For Smart, despite the fact that recent sociological conceptualisations of the family had loosened the constraints of earlier structural – functionalist approaches, sociology still undervalued the core elements of memory, emotion, love, unhappiness and anxiety (Smart, 2007, p. 31), or, more generally, issues of interiority. Smart outlined a series of concepts which she posited as overlapping areas of theoretical exploration, intended to complement and build on Morgan’s conception of family practices; memory, biography, embeddedness, relationality, and the imaginary. It was the way she utilized this toolbox of concepts, rather than positing a particular theoretical goal, that was significant about Smart’s approach. Briefly, Smart discussed how memories were always related to emotions and social relationships; how the biographical turn had particular salience for family relationships; how embeddedness as a concept could counter overly-individualistic accounts of family life; how the concept of relationality reinforced how individuals were constituted through their close kin ties, but not necessarily blood ties; and the importance that the cultural imaginary had for understanding family life.

In a study which involved interviewing parents with different cultural backgrounds in six families, Smart concluded that neither a thesis suggesting that secure, fixed roots were vital for ontological security, nor one suggesting fluidity and individual life biographies, could adequately explain the data. Rather the reality appeared to be more complex and nuanced; ‘biographies have elements of being self-made but mostly from fabrics woven by memory, emotion and context’ (2007, p. 107).

**Family as a Private Realm**

It was therefore important not to be pulled too far towards a conception of families as fluid, positively self-defining entities in order to redress the problems with previous static models. It was also important in seeking not to reify families, not to eschew the possibility of positioning them as functioning on an ideational, rhetorical level for individuals, as well as within something
STUDYING THE FAMILY

akin to a private realm. Croll, in a paper looking specifically at social capital and educational outcomes, concluded that data from the Household Panel Survey demonstrated the importance of families as a private realm of experience:

Families matter subjectively to young people as a source of identity and security and they also matter in relation to educational outcomes. The socio-economic status of their families makes a difference to young people educationally, but so does what parents do, in terms of communication and other activities...familial and non-familial aspects appear in these data as relatively distinct. In particular, the data show within-family processes as relatively self-contained. (Croll, 2004, pp. 412–413)

Perhaps the word private is problematic in that it works in opposition to the word public. Smart’s conception of personal life appeared to offer the appropriate alternative, able to acknowledge that the family encompassed something specific and unique, with a bounded quality, whilst not existing in an impermeable state, separable from the rest of life. It was important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater and lose sight of the enduring moral and emotional aspects of family life, which for many people were coterminous with a specific and bounded nexus of structurally or biologically defined relationships.

The anthropologists Collier et al. (1992) defined the American family as being constituted of relationships of affection and love, cooperation, and endurance, which were unconditional and governed by feeling and morality, and were in symbolic opposition to the market relations of capitalism and the regulated sphere of state control. However, they were also quick to point out the contradictions that this contained; the place of nurturance was also the place of the greatest levels of violence in Western society. The symbolic and reified notion of ‘the family’ was used to gloss over its complexities and contradictions. Finch’s statement that we were in ‘a world where families are defined by the qualitative character of the relationships rather than by membership,’ (Finch, 2002, p. 71), whilst true for some families, could not be applied to all. Any reading of ‘the family’ that was too singular would fail to do justice to the complexities, contradictions, and subtleties which continued to make it such an important idea.

THEORIZING THE FAMILY: A POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD

As is clear from the above, there is considerable complexity in the apparently simple concept of ‘the family’. We have not offered a comprehensive review of research, but have rather indicated the problematic areas that we have tried to take account of in conducting our investigation, and especially in constructing our methodology. We summarise them as five overlapping areas.
CHAPTER 2

Speaking of ‘the’ Family

Some research suggests that use of the definite article ‘the’ before the word family reifies the concept in a way which at best offers limited scope for analysis, and at worst colludes with a policy-driven rhetoric which implicitly carries with it normative values. However, not being able to speak about ‘the family’ at all creates a theoretical alternative which, whilst opening up possible avenues of exploration, can simultaneously hinder the interpretation of data collected in the field. In their everyday lives people do think about and are deeply influenced by the concept of the family (Morgan, 1996). The concept is extremely powerful precisely because it is a vehicle for the normative values of the times and the difficulties in pinning down any one definition is exactly what allows it to continue to be of use in so many contexts. It is the fact that it is a reified ideal which symbolises people’s beliefs and values, as well as encompassing the everyday, fluid, lived experiences and practices, which lends it its resonance.

With reservations, therefore, we have adopted the idea of the family, but have taken it to be a complex and fluid model, at once both specific and general. One of its strengths is that it acts as a negative reference group precisely in order to appeal to a normative standard of behaviour. This was illustrated by the interviews that Jordan et al. (1994) conducted with families in order to ascertain how they achieved consistency in their narratives and how they accounted for their decision-making. Choices were mainly justified with two criteria; ‘putting the family first’ and ‘making something of themselves’. The concept of the family was mobilized by interviewees to account for their choices across the many narratives that families told about their different and particular family contexts; ‘the moral accountability adopted by the interviewees, particularly with reference to ‘family’, provides a sense of real and binding obligation’ (Jordan et al., 1994, p. 95).

We have also been particularly influenced by Morgan’s concept of ‘family practices’ which allows for the interaction of matters external to the conventional concept of the family, for example, schooling, with its internal dynamics.

Parental Involvement in Schooling

Next, we note the very high influence of parental involvement and interest on their children’s educational attainment - an influence itself affected by social class position. In doing so we have been careful to avoid an unrelenting determinism, seeking to capture difference and variation from the general findings in the literature. Understanding the ‘person in context’ is key to this precaution. We have been concerned to rectify the gender bias in some
research methods, and have been particularly anxious to capture the role of women in the families we studied.

*Cultural Reproduction*

The role of the family in cultural reproduction, and its relationship to social mobility through education, is a major part of our conceptual framework. However, in this area too, we have attempted to restrict deterministic interpretation; what is true in terms of macro-analyses of mobility, is not necessarily salient, or effective, at the micro-level of the individual family. Here the reproduction of moral values and beliefs, and of what Bertaux and Thompson called, ‘projections and identifications, love and anger, symbols and desires’ (1997, p.7), may have a more emotionally potent effect in the lived experience.

*Narrative and History*

An important element for us is the way families use narrative and history to understand themselves, their biographies and futures, and to display themselves to others. We have attempted to carry out research which can address the complexities and contradictions of family life from the perspective of participants, so as to realize ‘more qualitatively based understandings of class and family living’ (Morgan, 1996, p. 68). Indeed the importance of such understandings arise from much of what we have discussed; for instance the lack of descriptions of processes which work against Bourdieu’s principle of the reproduction of cultural capital.

*Negotiation*

The research suggests that the internal dynamics of families are most appropriately interpreted as negotiations, but negotiations by members with different amounts of power. This is particularly important in cases where individual children’s identities, - as gifted, or talented, or high achieving - have been ascribed to them from outside the family - by teachers or psychologists. A substantive element is that negotiation can lead to the construction of values, beliefs and identities, and also to conflict, not necessarily to resolution.

It is obvious from the above that we needed a complex methodology, able to capture both changing nuances of individuals and apparently stable collective structures. The methodological considerations that followed from this are explored in the next chapter.