

Extended Book Review

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Kaufman SB, *Ungifted: Intelligence Redefined*, Basic Books: New York, NY, 2013, ISBN 9780465025541 (pbk), 424 pp \$29.99.

Reviewed by: Derek Cavilla

“Man is a being in search of meaning,” Plato

Since the dawn of Western civilization, mankind has explored the nature, origin, and effects of intelligence as it relates to the human experience. In his book, *Ungifted: Intelligence Redefined*, Scott Kaufman uses his personal story as the impetus for a cogent examination of how intelligence is defined and measured in the modern world, the rationale behind the various labels of knowledge, and the facets that he feels coalesce into the concept of intelligence. While the story is personal, Kaufman maintains an effective balance of insightful narrative alongside succinct and well-supported scientific examinations of his various constructs that ultimately end with a new definition for intelligence: “the dynamic interplay of engagement and abilities in pursuit of personal goals” (2013: 302). While the definition appears broad, the journey provided to the audience is enlightening and stimulates the reader to reexamine intelligence testing and the labels that stem from identification such as “gifted” or “learning disabled”. The common thread throughout the text is that intelligence must be considered a fluid, evolving concept rather than viewed as a fixed ability that is beyond our control. Is this truly a “redefinition” of intelligence, as claimed by the author, or simply a suggestion to examine the concept of intelligence with a broader lens?

After a touching prologue, where Kaufman brings the reader back to his childhood conundrum of being labeled “learning disabled” yet passionate about his continued cognitive growth, the reader is exposed to the ideas of the nature and nurture theories of development as well as the history of how intelligence testing emerged as a tool for measuring human potential. Kaufman reveals that nature and nurture work in tandem, not in competition, providing eloquent insight through easily understood scientific examples and studies. An excellent example of the author’s continuously empowering and positive message is revealed in his delineation between intelligence and greatness: “there are many people whose actual levels of greatness far exceed their prediction based on their IQ test scores alone . . . Talent must be viewed as a multidimensional and multiplicative developmental process” (2013: 16–17). This tenet is established to directly contrast the

method most often used to assess intelligence – the IQ test. However, rather than simply berate a procedure that he clearly feels is ineffective in isolation, Kaufman gives a stellar account of the research and history of intelligence testing. Complementing the framework for the development of intelligence tests, an overview of the most common instruments as well as an analysis of the regular distribution of human intelligence is presented in order to illustrate how people are labeled “learning disabled,” of “average intelligence,” or “gifted”.

The book next examines who is “learning disabled” and who is “gifted” while drawing parallels between the two. As a person who was officially diagnosed with a learning disability, Kaufman gives raw insight into the first term, stating that his label caused him to feel “imprisoned” as a student due to lack of options for rigorous or creative tasks. His transition from the learning disabled label to the gifted label occurs through an analysis of the inner working of the dyslexic mind, ending with the suggestion: “perhaps instead of labeling dyslexics as learning disabled, we should call them visually gifted” (2013: 64). That the author has been the victim of a stigmatizing label may explain why his message throughout his exploration of the essence of intelligence remains contagiously optimistic. Through an authentic story of how he first met gifted students and became an unofficial participant in his school’s gifted program, Kaufman provides insight into the clinical aspects of giftedness as well as the holistic idea of people with “gifted souls.” This section makes it clear that giftedness is inherently connected to a person’s available access to resources and the environment, as well as helps to clarify why most gifted children tend to emerge from upper-middle class families of the dominant culture. This sad reality provides further support for the need to consider the multifaceted nature of intelligence so that potential is measured in a more universal manner.

Kaufman uses biology as well as Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory to shed light on the power of intrinsic motivation and a person’s capacity to grow and excel in areas of intense interest. The idea of passion and inspiration is then coupled with the construct of mindset, established and explained eloquently using Dweck’s (1986) theory of goal attainment, which discusses how people approach tasks with either a mastery or a performance orientation. This analysis illustrates why the idea of fixed intelligence, as suggested by a static IQ score, is neither plausible nor equitable in the grand scope of assessing a person’s overall ability. Rounding out this section is a discussion of self-regulation. Essentially, the author is attempting to show that willingness and commitment to a task results in effective mastery and development of a skill, using research to support the notion that “self-discipline predicts academic achievement better than IQ” (2013: 133). This section inspires the reader to consider all of the components of intelligence as they connect to the development of the whole child, thus allowing us to examine the construct of ability with an open mind and from a fresh perspective.

Creativity, deliberate practice, and talent development – as they relate to the notion of general intelligence (*g*) – clearly illustrate that *g* is a complex, multifaceted construct that is quite amorphous and difficult to encapsulate as a single entity. By the end of this section, we clearly understand how a single test could never capture or measure a person’s true level of ability, which leads the reader to the point of the book: does the definition of intelligence need to be reconsidered? In his final chapter, Kaufman offers his Theory of Personal Intelligence and clarifies its foundational tenets: (1) the self is a core aspect

of human intelligence; (2) engagement and ability are inseparable, dynamically feeding off each other as we engage in the world; and (3) both controlled and spontaneous cognitive processes can be adaptive for acquiring a personal goal (2013: 303–305). The new definition is more of a clarification than an innovation, but the message is strong and essential: intelligence is flexible rather than fixed and human potential is a “constantly moving target” (2013: 305). Therefore, if labels of ability continue to be applied to people, they will require reevaluation over the course of one’s lifetime in order to be truly representative of the myriad components that give rise to man’s greatest mystery: intelligence.

The dynamic interplay between the author’s personal narratives and a litany of highly respected research studies shows not only his passion for the topic, but also his firm grasp on the nature of intelligence. Kaufman’s new framework achieves the goal of asking the reader to examine the idea of intelligence not from a new perspective, but from *multiple* perspectives – taking into consideration what it truly means to be gifted beyond the mere attainment of 130 on an IQ test. As a leader, Kaufman did not let the system hold him back with a learning disabled label. Instead, he sharpened his focus, explored avenues to support his success and growth, and reflected on the process while broadening his understanding on multiple levels. Even more, he did not stop with his own journey. He empowered himself to share his findings with the world so that his message would resonate and have exponential impact not only on gifted learners, but also on every learner within the educational system. While his inspirational voice and scientific examination of the nature of human development may not solve the ultimate enigma of intelligence, it certainly evokes feelings of truth with regard to what resembles genuine giftedness – taking us one step closer toward better understanding of our meaning not just individually, but as the human collective.

References

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Author biography

Derek Cavilla earned his MEd in Teacher Leadership in 2013 and is currently pursuing an EdD in Education, both with specialization in the area of gifted education, from the University of Central Florida. He is the instructional coach at a public charter school and supports the intellectual and affective needs of elementary students using a focus on gifted education strategies. Upon completion of his doctorate, Derek plans to enter the realm of higher education in order to collaborate on and facilitate the reform of educational policy at the state and national level. cavilla101@mac.com

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