

Title: Family Beliefs and Practices around Academic Ability and Social Mobility; narratives of contradiction, continuity, and resistance

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Abstract

Utilising a composite narrative method, this study analyses the educational life histories of three families in the North-East of England where a child has been labelled as academically gifted and where there was unlikely to have been any prior experience of post-compulsory schooling among family members. The research provides descriptions of family beliefs and practices across three generations around giftedness and educational achievement, particularly in relation to social mobility and intergenerational transmission of attitudes and values. In examining these patterns, it is argued that educational beliefs and practices are best explored within the context of wider family beliefs and values as the latter are found to complicate or contradict the former. Narratives reveal beliefs about innate giftedness, which contradict parallel descriptions of the importance of parental support. Narratives of upward social mobility and resistance in the face of perceived class boundaries have accounts of individualism at their core and contain continuities with other accounts of resistance across generations.

Context for the Research

The research discussed here is drawn from a doctoral thesis (Mazzoli, 2010) which uses a narrative approach to explore perceptions of academic giftedness¹ and wider educational values in families where a child has been labelled as gifted and talented at school. The thesis was conceived of primarily as a way of countering the normative assumptions of the preponderance of psychological studies of giftedness, which rarely consider the child within their family context, other than to explore optimal home environments for nurturing high academic achievement. These families, with little or no experience of post-compulsory schooling, were also selected in order to consider students from less privileged backgrounds, traditionally under-represented in gifted education programmes. The years 2002-2007 in particular saw the New Labour government spearhead a relatively high profile national policy for gifted and

talented provision in mainstream schools in England. This focused on school-based identification of a high-performing cohort and a national centre of expertise, the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY). A desire to essentially ‘rebrand’ giftedness as an inclusive concept, capable of recognising underachieving students with potential, as well as high achievers, and in so doing become a tool in the drive to improve relative rates of social mobility, underpinned policy (Adonis, 2007), if not practice.

Introduction: research on giftedness, class and education

Research into giftedness is a highly contested field burdened by a difficult historical legacy. Unresolved value-orientations linked to the complexities of the excellence-equity debate are complicated by the structural determinants of a reductionist research legacy. Francis Galton’s conception of innate, general intelligence, posited in 1865, still informs current definitions and lay conceptions (White, 2006). Whilst some researchers do consider non-cognitive components such as motivation and the importance of environmental influences, holding to a more developmental notion of multivariate intelligence that develops in context (e.g., Sternberg, 2004), critics argue that such holistic understandings of giftedness are either rhetorical, attempts to make the research field more palatable to a wider audience, or remain largely theoretical, whilst practice continues to orient itself towards something more akin to the Galtonian idea (Borland, 1997). When contextual criteria (for instance teacher nomination or portfolios of evidence) are incorporated into identification processes, standardized test scores still tend to hold greater sway in practice, not least because these are the most efficient systems (Mazzoli Smith, forthcoming). Indeed, it is argued that the practice of identifying children at all points to an ongoing bias towards conceiving of giftedness as an individual, fixed, measurable, and psychological trait (Plucker and Barab, 2002; Borland, 1997).

Progressive models such as the ‘living theory approach’ (Hymer et al., 2009) which do not advocate identification of individual students are therefore essential if gifted education is to fully disengage itself from the legacy of the past and from serving a disproportionate number of students from the highest socio-economic groups (Borland, 2005). Some, such as Howe, argue that ‘in the right circumstances almost anyone can produce exceptional skills’ (1990: 62), which, if true, logically points to the fact that identifying gifted children is at least partly about identifying those whose circumstances have favoured them to develop in this way.

However, there is also strong resistance to this view in the form of claims that some infants display precocious abilities which mark them out in the early years (Freeman, 1998). Such debates could benefit from engagement with sociological studies of the family context, yet there is almost no dialogue between research in the sociology of education and research on giftedness.

Relevant sociological studies therefore deliberately inform the orientation of this research, from Bourdieu's seminal notion of cultural capital to Feinstein *et al.*'s (2008) large scale statistical surveys, which have found that parental interest and involvement, that is beliefs, values, aspirations and attitudes, are the key variables in a child's educational attainment, over and above material deprivation *per se*. Other pertinent work such as that of Desforges (2003) demonstrates that the extent of a parent's involvement with their child's education is influenced by the perception of their role and their confidence in fulfilling it, mediated by their own relationship to school and education. Bertaux and Thompson's (1997) work on the transmission of *subjective resources* such as values, beliefs, skills and culture from one generation to the next as the key to understanding family dynamics and the genesis of identity moves theories of cultural reproduction beyond a Bourdieusian reliance on rational choice and is central to this study.

Despite concerns about the reification of 'the' family in research and policy (Jagger and Wright, 1999), the concept continues to be extremely powerful precisely because it is both a reified ideal, which symbolises people's normative beliefs and values, as well as encompassing every day, fluid, lived experiences and practices. Influenced by work in the sociology of the family (e.g., Morgan, 1996; Smart, 2007) it is the unit of study here, intended to counter simplistic, unitary proxies for the family often used in educational studies.

Methodology

A purposive sample from within a random quota sample was used to target students whose parents were from the lower socio-economic groups and unlikely to have experienced higher education themselvesⁱⁱ. The constructivist critique of the idea of context-free knowledge (e.g., Henriques *et al.*, 1998), whether at the level of academic discipline, psychological test, or classroom exercise, underpins the approach because it enables a more holistic view of the student and politicizes a field which is being called into service for a social inclusion agenda,

but which regularly fails to account for its ideologically-driven nature, or social embeddedness. In this study ‘family’ is used to denote all the people that the student themselves designated as such and who would be participating in the interviews.

Data was generated through topical life history interviews with the whole family, referred to as ‘family educational life histories’. Second interviews were used to test emerging interpretations and check details from the first interviews. A composite method of narrative analysis was used, based on the Biographical Interpretive Method (Wengraf, 2001), the Free-Association Narrative Interview Method (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000), and Denzin’s Interpretive Interactionism (2001). Each interview transcript was subjected to a number of successive readings, firstly broadly structural in nature, and then core stories were identified to read for content pertinent to the main research themes. For the purposes of such in-depth narrative analysis colloquialisms and paralinguistic details were included in the transcripts and the families, assured of complete anonymity, were happy for their words to be used verbatim.

The Case Studies

This section discusses some of the findings in relation to the themes of contradiction, continuity and resistance in two main areas of evidence; giftedness, and class and social mobilityⁱⁱⁱ. The three families discussed here, the Booths, the Newlands, and the Desmonds, had children in Years 11 and 13 who were members of NAGTY at the time of the interviews (Fergus, Nicholas and Amanda respectively). They lived in post-industrial towns in County Durham. Family backgrounds were in the ship-yards and agriculture, the collieries, and the Forces. The Booths and the Desmonds had no examples of post-compulsory schooling in their families past or present, but Pete Newland, father to the NAGTY student, had undertaken night-school and was the first in his family to have continued in education post-16.

Giftedness

In all three family narratives there was continuity between children’s academic interests and abilities and that of their parents. For Maggie Desmond, there was a tone of personal regret woven through her descriptions of her daughter’s ability:

‘I hated it, hated school...I mean I couldn’t wait to leave. I was clever, very, very clever, but I got bullied terrible...so I just, I couldn’t wait to go... And I regret that now, I really, really do. To see like, how she’s [referring to her daughter Amanda] come on and I think, yeah, that, that could have been me. ’Cos I have the brains that she’s got, but I just wasted it and didn’t use it’.

Because Maggie was still frustrated with her temporary employment options, describing her current care in the community job in withering terms, the regret she felt had not appeared to dissipate. Pete Newland also claimed to share his son’s academic interests, describing how well he got on with a Physics lecturer at one of his son’s university interviews, ‘I would have graduated with a first out of his class...I thought to meself, yeh if only. You know the opportunities there...He, he’s got to do the things that I wished I had and didn’t.’ However the tone in which this was delivered and further similar references in the interview suggests that although Pete Newland regretted his lack of opportunities, he was less damaged because, having taken himself to night-school in his twenties, he had been able to make up some of the education he felt he lacked.

Parental narratives of their children’s innate, individual ability attest to the resilience of the historical legacy of research on intelligence, deflecting focus away from the importance of cultural capital; the families were vociferous in explicitly stating that their children alone were responsible for their academic achievements. Yet contradictory narratives around wider family values simultaneously stressed parental support as vital to a child’s development. In this excerpt Shirley Booth described her son’s autonomy with regard to his high ability, but elsewhere in the interview she referred to how much support was provided at home, from reading to children to overseeing homework and influencing the choice of Sixth Form College:

‘Yes, it’s lovely, it’s nice to say, ‘Oh, Fergus got an ‘A’’ - it is, it’s really nice to say it. And in Maths, but, I, I also like to think that he’s done it, he’s done it by himself. I haven’t had any input to be able to get him an ‘A’. Do you understand what I mean? It’s all his hard work that’s done that, but it is nice to say it...’

A strong belief about the importance of parental support and input in two of the families in particular fed into these families’ value judgements of other parents, Pete Newland saying, ‘Teach the parents what’s available so they can show the kids. As long as the parents are interested, [but] a lot are not.’ In his response to my question about the origins of high ability

Pete said; 'I don't, don't know where it's from, ehm but, I think it doesn't lie with governments, it doesn't lie with policies, I think it lies with parents themselves'. In the case of a gifted child this parental input took on greater importance still, Pete saying, 'What you find difficult is that when you do have a child that's classed as gifted, you have to give them even more chances, more opportunities because if you don't, otherwise you'd feel as if you'd held them back.' The Newlands reflected on their own parenting as an active process:

Debbie Newland: 'I was, I think we can, if we stood back now and did nothing more, I would think that we've done a good job,'

Pete: 'We've done, we've done the parents' part.'

Debbie: '..and I think he can go out in the light, into life and be a responsible young person and knowing what's out there and how to go about things and how to get more out of life. Confidence. We've given him, we've given him that.'

There was also intergenerational continuity in the values-driven narratives of working hard, described as being the foundation on which parents actively supported their children, primarily through the provision of opportunities. Yet there was inconsistency here too in terms of how the Newlands endorsed educational support, opportunities and provision as vital and yet denied these had any part in influencing Nicholas's actual attainment, Pete and Debbie stating at different points in the interviews that 'that's him...that was his make-up. That wasn't something we've done'; 'he just absorbs knowledge, always has done'; and that giftedness is 'a natural talent, a natural ability'.

Narratives about innate ability, which could on the one hand be seen as significantly downplaying familial influence from one generation to the next in terms of cultural context, linked generations together in terms of hereditary traits. Along with narratives of Nicholas's precociousness, there were references to Pete's and Nicholas's shared academic interests and innate ability; 'I just needed to know. I had this inquisitive mind, I just, I just absorbed it.' Pete's description of himself here echoed almost word for word how he described his son's ability. Amanda Desmond's academic achievement and ability were also described in terms of her nature:

Amanda: 'I think that it kind of came naturally in primary school really 'cos...it's just, I just wanted to. I wanted to do well.'

Chris: 'Think some kids are like Amanda, they've got a willingness to absorb.... she's like a sponge, she takes everything in.'

Amanda suggested that a large part of giftedness was the ability to do well without working as hard as others, saying, 'You don't have to try as hard, it just kind of comes.' Here again however the family also offered a range of causal or motivational factors to explain Amanda's academic success. For instance, her brother's lack of achievement at school was seen to act as a deterrent, and being accelerated at primary school was described as motivating.

Class and Social Mobility

The case studies provide evidence of how wider family values situate and contextualise a desire for upward social mobility. Narratives of resilience in the face of poor schooling and changing labour markets described upwards mobility through education less as an aspiration and more as a necessity. One of the guiding tropes of the Booths' narrative was the idea that the parents' role was to improve the economic position of their children. Patrick focused on the double-pronged economic argument of the contemporary dearth of jobs for unqualified young people at school-leaving age and the importance of a decent income, citing evidence from personal experience; 'we make 'em think, so they don't end up where we are...we can tell them the money what they can make, at the end of the day, they need the money'. Shirley said:

'...as the years have gone on you've seen that you can't go straight out to work, you've got to go to get more education to be able to open that field again, because that, in our field where there's like all the factories and the trades and everything, you see them shutting down day after day after day.'

Resistance in class terms took the form of boundary work, through recourse to cultural stereotypes and powerful projection of values in the rejection of the educational biographies of others. Shirley said:

'I feel sorry for these kids who haven't got no parental support... That, that type, seeing that sort of side of life as well, that, that end of life. Er, and young kids having kids. And they'll shove them to school just to get rid of them.'

There was a marked shift in this passage to a generalized other, defined by words like ‘that type’, ‘that end of life’ and ‘benefits’ or ‘dolies’, which homogenized them into a group held at bay. Patrick and Shirley conveyed that, despite their low-wage incomes, they did not see themselves as at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder and strongly condemned those thought not to espouse the family’s belief in deferred gratification and the instrumental importance of education for life after school. They did this in part by setting up an oppositional discourse and defining themselves against this more deprived, generalized ‘other’ who lived in a certain area of their town, separating themselves by virtue of their strong work ethic. Patrick said: ‘I left school, but I’ve never been on the dole since I left school, which isn’t many people can say, can say that.’

Both the Booths and the Newlands conveyed anger and incomprehension towards families that did not reflect their values, citing first-hand evidence to support these narratives. A contradiction was apparent in relation to Shirley and Pete’s integration of such first-hand evidence into their narratives alongside the desire not to be too closely linked to those feared and denigrated through too much intimate knowledge. For instance Shirley said ‘He would say to me he was an ex-junkie, and he were, and I’m thinking, well I don’t know anybody like that.’ Regular close contact with the very families who were perceived to be a risk to theirs both at school and at home was threatening and as a result inconsistencies and contradictions arose. However, Shirley and Pete did not hold back in using themselves as negative reference points with regards to their own children, Shirley saying; ‘We’ve just said there is more to life than what we’ve got’. Their aspirations for their children’s educational achievement would be met by *not* following their example, but the children were nevertheless to heed their advice on education and their concerns about less desirable families. These tensions underlay the narratives.

Being resilient in the face of class constraints took the form of individualistic narratives of ‘breaking the mould’ beyond expected working-class boundaries. The narratives described precedents for this across generations, with participants appearing to be untroubled by class transgression. The Newland’s story in particular was one of separation - socially, financially, educationally and aspirationally - from the family’s roots, in order to pursue an individualized career path towards what they constructed as the top of society. They described a transition

from the worldview of their parents' generation, where the working classes were 'cannon fodder' and 'bank managers, doctors and teachers were the leaders of society', to their own current perspective where professional classes were just 'ordinary people.' Their narratives gave lengthy examples of precursors to this resilient behaviour. Pete described how his mother was the only one of her community to buy her council house when it became possible to do so, going against her husband's fears of being in debt and her own mother's view of it; 'Houses are for rich folk, not for people like us'. Pete continued:

'...So my mother was one for breaking the mould, my dad was quite happy to go along with things...I didn't actually go into shipyards, which disappointed me dad, but I think opened up everybody else's eyes in the family that I was going to be different. And at the time everybody used to go with their dads when they were 16 to the local working men's club and drink pints of beer, even at 16 you know, I never did, so...'

Laura: 'Was that your choice?'

Pete: 'Yes, yes. For, I just, I just didn't want to be part of, the, the general movement, this is what you do when you get to this age. I just didn't want to be part of that because I thought there was something else, but I didn't know what it was, I wasn't educated enough to know what was out there, but I just knew there was something, there had to be.'

Pete drew a line of continuity between his mother's resistance to her class boundaries and his choice to take an individual path in the next generation.

But in the case of one family narrative there was less boundary work in evidence and the family engaged more fully with educational failures as well as successes. The Desmond parents, and others in the immediate family, had experienced harsh school environments describing violence, bullying and constant changes of school, and Amanda apart, family members had low levels of educational achievement. But when Amanda's family started to speak about her there was a marked shift in expressive phonology, the effect of which was to convey unequivocally that Amanda would be successful and reach her educational goals, as in this excerpt spoken by her step-father:

Chris: 'She wants her future, she wants to have a comfortable future. We don't want her to, to go ahead and struggle, she's going to be a vet, she's going to earn good money, she's

going to have a good life, a good home, what is it? What is it [she wants]? A brown Labrador?’

There were a number of times when Amanda’s future and academic ability were directly juxtaposed with that of family members who had not been successful, affirming how important her success was, but also how precarious. In order to achieve what she wanted, there was an explicit acknowledgement in the family’s narrative that she was to resist the path of those who had achieved poorly at school and beyond. However, this family’s narrative managed to bridge these descriptions of educational failure and a cycle of deprivation and lack of agency with the possibility of Amanda’s upward social mobility through success in the education system by holding a shared belief in individual change, supported by personal testimony of where this had happened. Chris used himself as one example:

‘Cos like I say, I mean I, I didn’t have anybody to point me down the right path, so I was allowed to stray and by God I strayed...I mean once I, once I’d got away from home and I’d got in the army, and then in, in other jobs I’ve done... But I, I’m now, I like to learn, I like to do courses, I like to get on and do things, so I’m totally different now than what, what I was.’

Such descriptions of individuals who transformed negative educational and working patterns into positive ones suggest an adherence to the belief that people can at any point change their life trajectories and outcomes. This cultural script of possibility and individual agency was striking in comparison with the core cultural scripts of the other families, which tended to suggest that human nature was rather more intractable and determined by innate ability and early experiences.

Interpretations and Concluding Comments

All the families offered evidence that, despite the general theory of cultural reproduction, they were, at least through their gifted children and in conjunction with their wider family values, quite capable of breaking the reproductive moulds in which their family history had cast them, providing evidence of ways in which individual variation can work to complicate Bourdieu’s principle. The tendency in several of the families to suggest that their gifted child needed more

opportunities and better provision than other children concurs with Desforges's finding (2003) that the more highly a student attains, the more involved in their education a parent becomes and therefore the labelling of the child may influence the agentic orientation of parents towards them. Furthermore, whereas pathways may appear relatively homogenous if considered from the perspective of educational values and investment, when wider narratives, which incorporate class and other family values are considered, apparently similar stories of success against the odds and a shift in attitude towards education in one generation appear to be less undifferentiated.

The concept of ability as innate was left largely unquestioned, families accepting that being gifted was something one was born with. The narratives therefore suggested that for these families the shifting tide researchers in gifted education write about, away from an idea of a fixed, general intelligence, towards a developmental notion of multivariate intelligence, did not play a significant part in their conceptions of giftedness. It is interesting that this conception is supported by, or coalesces with, individualistic beliefs, such as those around academic ability itself, and those more broadly connected with social mobility. Reay's (2004) claim that, in a meritocracy, academic success becomes the responsibility of the individual is strongly borne out by these narratives. Despite all their input and the many abstracted claims about the necessity of parental support for children to achieve, these parents accepted no responsibility for their children's actual achievements. This contradiction appears to attest to the strength of the historical legacy of giftedness as a very individual trait and political values associated with the New Labour government of the time, which attempted to play down the rigidities of social class so as to promote widespread aspirations and individualism free of class restrictions. The students conformed to something akin to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) individualization thesis, being apparently untroubled by class transgression and the narratives provide evidence of how such individualistic thinking was transmitted inter-generationally.

With regards to social mobility these case studies suggest that it involves both a 'pull' away from something and a 'push' towards something else. From the starting context that families were in, a fear of downward social mobility, arising from seeing at first-hand its consequences, worked hand in hand with aspirations for a better lifestyle. In our study, two families spoke at length about the changing economic climate for school-leavers in particular. The narratives also display strong projected emotional attachments to the educational biographies of others, through identification and rejection. The Newlands's phrase 'breaking the mould' calls to mind

Smart's (2007) use of the term 'self-made biographies' to foreground both how individual narratives are just that, individual constructions, but are also drawn from affective elements such as memory, emotion, love, unhappiness and anxiety, and from the narratives around them. There is evidence in these narratives of this complex interweaving of family histories and affective elements, which allow for both novelty and continuity in the narratives of successive generations, and positive identification as well as negative projection.

Such recourse to negative stereotypes of demonized families also fits with Craib's (2000) idea of bad faith narratives. Here emotional engagement is displaced in order to resist the reality of other lives and defend the narrator against the threatening emotions which they arouse. This then leads to contradictions in how such families are understood and described; both known, in order to reflect wider values, and distanced, in order to allay anxiety and reduce the need for understanding. This contradictory relationship to families around them was particularly well demonstrated in the Booth's narrative.

There was an interesting link between this boundary work and the way the gifted label was used in participant narratives. Analogous to Borland's (1997) argument about how an increasingly diverse community brings with it attendant desires to identify, categorize and segregate, the same desire for segregation was found at the level of the family unit. These families saw themselves as under threat from others who did not value education and they therefore had a vested interest in setting themselves apart through something like their child's gifted label and what this displayed about their values and aspirations to others. Indeed, the central place that hard work and motivation were afforded by them in the development of academic ability would lead to the conclusion that it was only those students who had already demonstrated high educational attainment and invested in it that should be labelled gifted and in turn should be in receipt of the greatest opportunities and advantages. This may explain the lack of interest these families showed in the identification of potential.

Yet different, wider family value systems were shown to give rise to differing agentic orientations, as in the case of the Desmonds, who did not employ cultural stereotypes to distance themselves from individuals who failed to engage with education. Through their narratives they dealt with the reality of educational failures and in so doing adopted a much more inclusive and developmental narrative around individual growth and change than the

other families did, which espoused the potential for a re-alignment of individual educational values at any point through the life course.

This narrative approach to understanding class and giftedness underscores the point made by Feinstein *et al.* (2008) that ‘person-in-context’ interactions are crucial for understanding successful pathways in education. These case studies explore the gifted children and their family members in their own individual contexts; giftedness-in-context. Such an approach leads to rich or ‘thick’ descriptions, in relation to class and social mobility, revealing the contradictions and continuities that are at play in the intergenerational transmission of educational values and beliefs.

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ⁱ 'Gifted' and 'giftedness' are unhelpful, contested terms, poorly defined and inconsistently operationalized in education programmes. They reify intelligence in a way which does nothing to promote a social inclusion agenda today. However, since this was the formal descriptor in use during the policy period considered, the terms have been kept.

ⁱⁱ The families were from the ACORN (A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods) category 'Moderate Means', chosen as they were unlikely to have benefitted from higher education or be in possession of substantial means and therefore unrepresentative of the families which tend to benefit from gifted education programmes. A class dimension is therefore central to this study, yet like giftedness, class terminology is also problematic, yet could not be explored further in this paper.

ⁱⁱⁱ The excerpts provided are brief because of the limits of space. They cannot provide evidence for all the interpretations set out in the commentary, but it is hoped that they are illustrative of the main themes. Lengthy interview excerpts are provided in the PhD thesis (Mazzoli, 2010) and in a book based on it (Mazzoli Smith and Campbell, 2012). This paper extends the arguments set out in the book in a particular direction.