Feminist Perspectives on Talent Development

*A Research-Based Conception of Giftedness in Women*

Sally M. Reis

“Tremendous amounts of talent are being lost to our society just because that talent wears a skirt.”

Shirley Chisolm

The stories of talented and eminent women are too seldom told. Little research has been conducted and less is known about the ways women’s talents emerge and are developed, how they differ from the talents of men, and the choices some women make to construct and use their gifts and talents. The social and political movement focusing on women during the past five decades has provided an emerging understanding of their talents as well as the roles that some gifted women have played in our society and the forces that shaped those roles. Over the last two decades, I have studied talented girls and women from all domains across their life spans and have answered some questions, but introduced even more (Reis, 1987, 1995, 1998, 2001). The decision to identify this diverse group as talented or eminent rather than gifted stems from their collective preferences for these descriptors. Through these collective research experiences, a definition of talent in women has emerged that is summarized as follows. **Feminine talent development occurs when women with high intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership ability or potential achieve in an area they choose and when they make contributions that they consider meaningful to society. These contributions are enhanced when women develop personally satisfying relationships and pursue what they believe to be important work that helps to make the world a healthier, more beautiful and peaceful place in which diverse expressions of art and humanity are celebrated.** The research reviewed in this chapter highlights the complex choices made by talented girls and women as well as the belief that the outcomes of these choices are profound, both in the women’s individual lives and for society at large.

There is an absence of continuity in the recognition of women’s contributions in history, resulting in the need for each generation of women to
reinvent both their ideas and their collective feminist consciousness. Gerda Lerner (1993), for example, believes that throughout history, women’s talents have enabled them to challenge and disregard patriarchal constraints, gender-defined roles, and the continuing barrage of discouragement they have faced. Lerner believes that the inner assurance and serenity that accompany a developed talent have enabled some women to achieve at high levels but, too often, in isolation, loneliness, and under the derision of contemporaries.

Little doubt exists that regardless of the indicator used, fewer women than men achieve at levels that would enable them to be identified as gifted. Whether we consider books written, leadership positions attained, patents granted, or awards achieved, fewer women than men are recognized as gifted, and fewer produce this type and level of seminal work. Male professors, for example, produce more creative work in research publications than do female professors (Axelrod, 1988; Ajzenberg-Selove, 1994; Bateson, 1990), and men produce more works of art and make more contributions in all professional fields (Callahan, 1979; Ochse, 1991; Piirto, 1991; Reis, 1987, 1998). As Callahan pointed out in 1979, and as is still true today, men write more books and win more prizes than do women. The September 2003 cover of American Psychologist, for example, lists the names of more than 30 Nobel winners in multiple areas, all of whom were male. Some of the complex reasons that fewer talented women with high potential achieve this level of eminence and the characteristics of those who do are summarized in this chapter.

NUANCES ABOUT FEMALE TALENT DEVELOPMENT

A fundamental question that underlies conceptions of giftedness and talent involves societal perceptions of, and who has the right to determine how, talents should be used. One of my closest childhood friends was a brilliant student in math and science who lived in a rather shabby second-floor apartment in the middle of the small factory city in which we grew up. Her father was a salesman and her mother stayed at home to raise my friend and her four siblings. My friend’s mother was a graduate of a fine East Coast women’s college and she read avidly, devouring books on philosophy, science, poetry, and fine fiction. Whenever our friends visited her apartment, she engaged us in provocative and lively discussions about some of the disciplines we later studied in college. I thought about my friend’s mother often during those years and wondered how she could be content in her life, why she didn’t find work that would enable her to use her considerable intellect, or what she might have become had she been born a few decades later. After college I returned to my home town to teach English and saw my friend’s mother often in the city library. We continued our talks and I came to understand that she was happy in her choices to raise her children and passionately pursue lifelong learning. My friend
Feminist Perspectives on Talent Development

grew up to be a scientist, one of the few women in her college class to earn a doctorate, and she told me that her mother was her greatest support system. All of her younger siblings finished their college degrees and lead success adult lives (Reis, 1998).

Some may believe that this woman’s considerable intellectual talents were squandered because she failed to earn an advanced degree or work in a high-status profession. Others may believe that her talents were well used because she raised children who made positive contributions to the world. Have expectations about how a talented woman should use her potential changed in the last few decades? Many talented and highly educated women make decisions not to marry in order to pursue their talents, although that number has decreased from previous decades. For example, 75% of all women who received a Ph.D. between the years of 1877 and 1924 never married (Hutchinson, 1930). Lise Meitner, Rosalind Franklin, and Rachel Carson never married. Although Margaret Sanger and Margaret Mead married, they divorced early and lived their most productive years alone, as did Marie Curie, whose husband died only 11 years after their marriage. Margaret Bourke-White married twice for brief periods and her divorces enabled her to focus singly on her photography. Einstein’s first wife, Mileva Maric, sacrificed her own career in physics to assist him in his early work and subsequently raise their children and maintain their home life, but even that sacrifice was not enough to keep the marriage intact (Gabor, 1995). Lee Krasner, married to Jackson Pollock, sacrificed years of her own productivity in art to help hold his life together, help him battle problems with alcohol and depression, and increase his productivity at a cost to hers. Although Mileva Maric never recovered her career, Lee Krasner was able to apply her talent and determination to achieve eminence later in life, although the relationship with Pollock cost her dearly.

Marriage, for some of these women, caused them to sacrifice their own talent to the development of the talent of males in their family. For others who make these commitments, it is not marriage but rather other family ties that demand attention. Sir Francis Galton’s older sister, Milicent Adele, devoted a good part of her formative years to tutoring and caring for her younger prodigy brother. Thomas Edison’s mother spent almost two decades raising and home schooling her brilliant, unusual son. Do similarly intelligent and talented women with high levels of potential who follow paths destined to nurture the talents of others underachieve in life? Should my friend’s brilliant mother be considered an underachiever? Or does the response to this question depend on the time period of the life of the person being considered?

PROFILES OF TALENTED WOMEN

Like a broken record, many of the talented women I have studied who have not achieved high levels of success tell a similar story (Reis, 1995; 1998).
They were extremely bright in school, but as they grew up, they began to feel ambivalence about their future and their responsibilities to loved ones. Their dreams for future high-profile careers and important work wavered and diminished and they began to doubt what they previously believed they could accomplish. Their beliefs about their own ability as well as their self-confidence were undermined during childhood or adolescence. They acquired some “feminine modesty,” leading to changes in self-perceptions of ability and talent, which subsequently affected others’ perceptions of their potential. Some fell in love in college and, suddenly and unexpectedly, the dreams of the person they loved became more important to them than their own dreams and they lowered their aspirations to pursue the relationship. Some decided to become nurses instead of doctors, and some completed a bachelor’s degree instead of a Ph.D. Some accepted less challenging work that was different from what they dreamed about doing a decade earlier, but that enabled them sufficient time to raise their families and support their partner’s work (Reis, 1987, 1995, 1998). Some of those talented women born after the Women’s Movement were shocked to find that they were expected to make choices that benefited those they loved, after being consistently told that they could “have and do it all.” They found out, often without preparation, that they could not. It was almost as if they had been told that there were no windmills on their journey and when they encountered one on the road to a successful career, they simply did not understand what to do.

This profile, however, does not describe all talented women. Some do achieve at the highest possible levels, but there are fewer of these women than men, and it is this fact that raises the most difficult question of all: Why are there so few eminent female creators and inventors (Ochse, 1991; Piirto, 1991)? As the majority of research conducted on high levels of productivity has concentrated on men (Cattell, 1903; Diamond, 1986; Lindauer, 1992; McLeish, 1976; Oden, 1968; Schneiderman, 1989; Sears, 1977; Simonton, 1975, 1977, 1984, 1988, 1989), these questions are difficult to answer, but some of the reasons that have been suggested are discussed in this chapter. A case study of one of the women who participated in this research is included in the next section.

ACHIEVEMENT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TALENTED WOMEN AND MEN

The reasons that some talented women underachieve are different from those that affect their male counterparts. Life events, especially involving relationships with partners, loved ones, and children, have the most compelling impact on decisions about whether one can develop her talents to the highest levels (Reis, 1998). As noted, in most professions and occupations, men continue to surpass women in the highest levels of professional and creative accomplishments (Arnold & Denny, 1985; Callahan,
Feminist Perspectives on Talent Development

1979; Hollinger and Fleming, 1988; Kerr, 1985; Ochse, 1991; Piirto, 1991; Reis, 1987; 1998; Subotnik & Arnold, 1995). Yet, success in our society is primarily defined by male standards, such as status, productive work accomplishments, financial benefits, fame, and levels of importance. These indicators do not adequately define accomplishment for some talented women who define success as having a positive impact on the world, making changes that benefit and improve the life of others or the health of the planet, and living a life that adheres to a system of values based on integrity, honesty, and compassion (Reis, 1987; 1998). This does not mean that all successful men eschew these values, nor does it mean that all talented women who fail to succeed in these areas of status do not have regrets about lost opportunities. Some talented women feel deep loss when they reflect on the loss of the chance to complete work that made a positive impact on the world (Reis, 1995; 1998). Some believe that they had the potential to become inventors, composers, politicians, and to achieve high levels of accomplishment. Although they understand the reasons their lives flowed in other directions, often because of those they love, they look back with regret on “what might have been,” despite their pride about lives lived with dignity, integrity, and in service to others (Reis, 1995).

Many measures of success used to define accomplishment in our society are based on male indicators and, in addition, men, and primarily White men, have developed most of the conceptions of giftedness and talent that have been recognized in both contemporary psychology and educational psychology (Sternberg & Davidson, 1986). They have also developed most historical and contemporary conceptions of intelligence and most assessment instruments and tools currently used to measure general intelligence. The work of women and culturally diverse theorists has only recently begun to influence current conceptions of talents and intelligence, and when a more comprehensive body of this work is developed, beliefs and perceptions may change. This chapter summarizes my current work on feminine perspectives of giftedness and talent development, as well as some of the interactions of personal and external barriers that influence this development.

A MODEL OF TALENT REALIZATION IN WOMEN

To understand the perspectives of talent realization in women, I studied 22 American women who gained eminence in diverse fields using the case study approach discussed by Gruber (1986). Using questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and document review, I probed these women’s perceptions about their work. Primary source data were used to document accomplishments, including their books, plays, articles, diaries, environmental successes, legislation, chapters, records, compact discs, as well as articles, chapters, books, dissertations, or other interviews with them or
about them. Each of these women was recognized as a major contributor to her field, and several achieved the distinction of being the first or one of the first women in her respective field. In other words, all achieved eminence and some were American pioneers in theater, politics, academia, literature and poetry, science, musical composition, government, business, environmental sciences, art, education, and other fields.

Over a decade of research in this area, a preliminary conception of talent realization in women emerged, which is further refined in this chapter (Reis, 1996, 1998). The factors that contribute to this model include: abilities (intelligence and special talents), personality traits, environmental factors, and personal perceptions, such as the social importance of the use of one’s talents to make a positive difference in the world. Each of these factors contributes to what Gruber called “self-mobilization” (p. 258), characterized in these women by the development of belief in self, a fervent desire to develop these talents, and a sense of destiny in women who made an active, conscious decision to develop their talents, often with little support and against many obstacles.

The talents of these eminent women evolved over many years and were constructed using varied earlier life experiences that served as valuable background and preparation for future accomplishments. The participants in this study illustrate that only some of these experiences were academic, as they often learned more from events in their lives after school ended. For example, an award-winning children’s writer waited until her children were older and then began to write, weaving into her literary work both her Hispanic heritage and the insights she gained as a mother. A congresswoman credited her successful tenure in the House of Representatives more on the organizational skills gathered in local community action groups such as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and on local political action than on the degree she had received decades earlier from a prestigious women’s college. It was, however, the career office at her college that helped her to better understand her qualifications for her campaign for Congress (Reis, 1998, p. 269).

Another interesting finding was the self-knowledge the women gained about the intensity of their lives, characterized by their need and obligation to pursue their talents in an active way. Many compared their own lives to the lives of their contemporaries – other equally talented women who appeared to live much calmer and, in some cases, happier lives. Still another finding was the diversification of talents in the majority of the women, as opposed to the single-minded focus of a few. In Isaiah Berlin’s 1953 essay The Hedgehog and the Fox, he quotes Archilochus as saying that the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing. Berlin’s essay explores types of intellectual thought and divides great Western thinkers into two intellectual camps, hedgehogs and foxes. Few of the talented
Feminist Perspectives on Talent Development

Abilities
- Above average potential (Renzulli, 1978)
- Contextual intelligence (Sternberg, 1985)
- Special Talents

Personality
- Determination
- Motivation
- Courage
- Risk-taking
- Intensity
- Energy
- Creativity
- Independence
- Patience

Environment
- Family support
- Important relationships
- Positive work environment

Perceptions of Relationships
- Importance of work
- Societal impact

Belief in Self and Desire to Develop One’s Talent
- Self-concept
- Self-esteem
- Sense of destiny and purpose

Realization of Talent in Women in
- Arts
- Literature
- Research
- Social Causes
- Maternal and Family
- Mathematics
- Science
- Social Sciences
- Business
- Athletics
- Music

Figure 13.1. Reis’s Model of Talent Realization in Women

women in this study were hedgehogs, as most diversify their abilities. This may be one of the reasons that some eminent women will not receive a Nobel Prize or become renowned outside of their fields, but they will contribute to, in the words of one woman, “a life well-lived, with the rich benefits of interesting relationships, meaningful work, intense interests, love, and contentment.”

The common traits characterizing these eminent women are summarized in Figure 13.1 and of particular note were the women’s self-perceptions, personalities, and experiences. Most made an intensely personal and conscious decision to actively nurture and develop their talents. Each of the factors in Figure 13.1 helped these women to believe in their potential to continually develop their talent and to contribute to positive changes in the world.
Abilities

Most of the women described themselves as having been well-above-average but not superior students in school; however, all but a few acknowledged having some special talents in areas such as music, writing, speech and debate, or theater. Renzulli (1978) discussed the distinction between above-average and superior abilities in giftedness in his three-ring conception of giftedness. In later work (1986), he distinguished between schoolhouse giftedness and creative–productive giftedness. He found that although both types of giftedness are important, persons who make “gifted” contributions within a particular domain of human performance are often those who display creative–productive giftedness. These women were not always superlative students, but each displayed creative and productive behaviors in their domains as adults. In every case, their abilities, interests, creativity, and motivation merged to enable them to develop their talents. Sternberg’s (1985; 1986) notion of contextual intelligence was also displayed by many of these women, who had to adapt to, change, or leave their environment in order for their talents to be realized and developed. One participant in the study, Dr. Francelia Butler, was married to someone she loved deeply. During their married life, her husband, a well-known newspaper editor, had consistently downplayed her talents. When he became gravely ill, he told her that he had not given her enough credit or encouragement for her talents, and apologized. Upon his death, which she described as the saddest period of her life, she gave up her security and her home, and moved with their young child to pursue her doctorate in English, eventually emerging as eminent in her field.

Personality Traits

The personality traits of these women differed greatly, but commonalities were found, such as determination, motivation, creativity, patience, and the ability to take and in some cases thrive on risks. Every woman exhibited determination, reflected by an ability to strive for success and to continue to persevere, often under adverse conditions and sometimes without the love and support of her family and/or partner. Each explained her source of determination differently. Some were certain that it had developed from the positive role modeling of parents who demanded elevated work habits. The congresswoman believed that her work ethic came directly from her parents, who never accepted less than her best efforts. Others explained that they developed their motivation, determination, and work ethic because their perceptions of the strong purpose they had to fulfill in their lives, such as preserving the environment, emerging as a successful composer, or providing talented economically disadvantaged urban youth with quality theater experiences and training. Still others believed that their motivation
came from their desire to produce, to have a positive impact on the world, and from the sheer joy of the act of creativity. An artist explained:

The process of doing art is often more important than the product to me because of my feeling that I have to get something out. The act of welding, of fusing metal together, is very important to me. The passion I feel, the violence of creating something as the sparks fly everywhere... gives me feelings that are hard to describe. It's a rich feeling, one of power, I guess (Reis, 1998, p. 232–233).

Each displayed a form of creativity rooted in the love of work, interests, and the way time was found for other essential aspects of life, such as family and relationships. Their sheer volume of work and persistent evolution into higher talent forms interacted with what appeared to be “learned creativity” as well as intense love for work. They also displayed patience, as some waited years to have the opportunity to invest considerable blocks of time to their talent, whereas others worked steadily over the years. The congresswoman waited until her youngest daughter was ready for college before running for office, and the environmental ecologist continued to work in her field for five decades despite initially being denied employment based on her sex. Each woman displayed careful patience in the development of her talent. In addition, each displayed a willingness to take risks and attempt tasks that she perceived other female intellectual peers did not have the courage or the interest to pursue.

Another personality trait displayed by each of these women was an intensity about work characterized by energy, passionate interest, and enjoyment. Some of the women were outwardly enthusiastic, whereas others were intensely quiet. Some laughed frequently and moved constantly; others were still, calm, shy, and almost reserved. However, each woman exuded an intense concentration, focus, and passion about her work. Several indicated that they experienced some feelings of guilt because they would rather be doing their work than anything else, and during these periods, they attempted to do more for their partners or children, sentiments also echoed by other eminent women (Antler, 1987; Dash, 1988; Gabor, 1995; Winstone, 1978). Eventually, most gained an acceptance of their choices in life.

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors that contributed to eminence in these women were diverse. Some came from upper-middle-class families; others were born into either middle-class or poor families. Most had parents who were well educated, but a few had parents who had little or no college education. Some attended prestigious women’s colleges, some went to large state universities, and still others did not graduate from college. Some
environmental factors were common across the majority of the women. Most had nurturing families who supported their talents and academic promise, although a few had nonsupportive families, and two came from abusive or distant families. Almost all had siblings, and although some were the oldest child, many were not. Those who had brothers usually believed that their parents paid more attention and gave more encouragement to their brothers. Most, but not all, were married or had long-term relationships, and all but two who married had children. A few decided not to have children so that they could pursue their talents without diversifying their lives. Two had husbands who had died young and, although they acknowledged their grief about these tragedies in their lives, these women also acknowledged that their husbands’ early deaths enabled them to more fully develop their own potential. Some divorced after realizing that their partners were not supportive of their talent development. Some delayed placing a primary emphasis on their career until they were able to because they believed their children needed them; others labored consistently on their journey of accomplishment.

Their home environments were quite diverse, as were their work environments. Some changed their daily work schedules often to enable their work to evolve, and several shifted paid employment often. Some accepted barriers at work and found creative options from work at home; others fought against negative work environments, eventually changing them. Some worked alone with singular concentration, whereas others needed the interaction of a group of colleagues, requiring less time for solitary work. All traveled a unique path to eminence, actively sought support for the development of their talents, continued to learn with formal or more personalized education and knowledge, and gained increasing levels of sophistication in their knowledge about both their needs for work and personal lives. Some enjoyed their personal lives, and others acknowledged that they experienced frequent periods of unhappiness, characterized by some loneliness, self-sacrifice, and a conscious decision to avoid what they considered a more conventional life. Some actively strived to separate their personal life and relationships from their work life and relationships, indicating that they needed that distance to achieve balance. Others combined work and personal lives, drawing no line whatsoever between the two, and were happy with this combination of activity in both lives.

Perceptions of the Social Importance of Their Work and a Sense of Destiny in Life

Each woman had a strong desire to use her talents in personally satisfying ways that would benefit society, and each had a sense of purpose and destiny about the importance of her work and contributions. In general, most
enjoyed their lives, readily acknowledging that they would not have been content simply to raise families, have good relationships with partners and friends, and pursue interests. Their work was critical to them and, because they believed their work could make a difference, they were willing to sacrifice some, but not all, of their personal choices to achieve in their fields. Some sacrificed having children or had fewer children, some gave up friendships or leisure activities, but all had close personal relationships with partners, husbands, siblings or friends that sustained them. When a controversial college president credited with many successes in her tenure was asked about friends, she answered simply that she had none, because of the time commitment and her perception that few people understood her obsession about her work. She did, however, have an extremely close relationship with her husband and her siblings (Reis, 1998).

Belief in Self, Sense of Destiny and Purpose, and Desire to Contribute and Develop Their Talents

Each eminent woman developed over time a belief in herself and a desire to translate her potential into work that made a difference in the world or was a creative contribution in life. Each had a sense of purpose about her talents and believed her positive belief in herself had emerged from success in work, as well as the development over time of a satisfying personal life. In the later years of their lives, each was satisfied with her life. Each had wanted to contribute and make a difference in the world, and believed that there was no choice about this contribution. These women were not satisfied with their lives unless they could continue to actively develop their talents. Most reported that they had friends and/or siblings with similarly high potential who were content to lead very different lives, ones that did not involve the sacrifices made to expend such high levels of focused work and energy. The congresswoman explained that her friends could not understand why she could not relax and enjoy her life after she had worked so hard and spent so many terms in the House of Representatives. These women, with similar levels of ability and education, would consistently ask why she would put herself through a rigorous campaign again and why she was not ready to relax, retire, and spend time on leisure activities. One of the most consistent findings in this research was the way that each woman explained her work ethic: Each wanted to contribute in some way, and believed that she had no choice in her actions, explaining that work was essential to her well-being and that “Something inside of me had to come out.” In other words, they actively constructed their giftedness.

This conception has similarities and differences to another model of talent development in women conceived by Noble, Subotnik, and Arnold (1996). In their model, the outcome’s component focuses on the fulfillment
of potential in gifted women across many domains or spheres, such as those for fulfilling personal and family relationships, community relationships, and the self-actualization of potential. The public sphere incorporates the fulfillment of talent by achieving leadership and eminence in professional domains, including the creation of ideas or products that change the course of a domain or a social arena (Noble, et al., 1996). In both the model I propose in this chapter and the Noble, Arnold, and Subotnik model, women can apply their talents and gifts to raising children, developing relationships, and making contributions within the community. In the public sphere of the Noble, Arnold, and Subotnik model, opportunities are provided for women to achieve high levels of accomplishment and leadership in professional areas, as well. The model for female talent development proposed in this chapter also differs from other models of giftedness in ways that are unique to women. An extended discussion of these differences is beyond the scope of this chapter, but Tannenbaum (1983, 1991), for example, proposed five factors that are essential to the fulfillment of gifted potential: superior general intellect, distinctive special aptitudes, a supportive array of nonintellectual traits, a challenging and facilitative environment, and the smile of good fortune and chance at crucial periods of life. None of the women in this study reported that they exhibited superior intellect as children, some grew up or lived as an adult in non-supportive environments, and many believed that they experienced “bad luck” at crucial periods in their lives. Most lacked high self-esteem as children, but increased their self-esteem and self-concept with age as they overcame obstacles.

Similarities also exist to earlier discussions of giftedness in the previous volume by Sternberg and Davidson (1986). In addition to findings supporting the work of Renzulli (1986) and Sternberg (1986) discussed earlier, this research supports the work of Gruber. These women lived their lives to achieve the kind of giftedness in which Gruber was interested, “the kind that can be transformed by its possessor into effective creative work for the aesthetic enrichment of human experience, for the improvement of our understanding of the world, or for the betterment of the human condition and of our prospects for survival as a species” (p. 248). This research also supports the later work of Sternberg (1999) and Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002) regarding the development of successful intelligence, as these eminent women succeeded in life on their own terms by developing their strengths, compensating for their weaknesses, and shaping their home and work environment to develop their unique gifts. To illustrate the richness of the lives of these women and some of the similarities and differences from previous work in this area, brief summaries of the lives of two women who participated in my study of eminent women are provided.
Feminist Perspectives on Talent Development

CASE STUDIES OF TWO FEMALE PIONEERS

Mary Hunter Wolf, Broadway Producer and Director, and Children's Theater Activist (1904–2002)

Mary was born in Bakersfield, California, in 1904 and her mother died two weeks later. Within two years of his wife's death, her father, a rancher, moved to Beverly Hills, an area that was at that time still rural. Her father took a job in banking and remarried when Mary was four years old. Mary remembered her stepmother as someone who was concerned about and attentive to her needs. Mary had many interests as a child but two stood out: reading and debates. By the time she reached high school she had attended several different schools and had learned to love the theater, dance, and drama. Her father died when she was 12 years old, and Mary continued to live with her stepmother, although her father's sister, Mary Austin, became more involved in her life. Mary Austin was divorced and her only child had been born with severe developmental delays and eventually died. An ardent feminist, she was the author of numerous books, articles, and plays, including a play titled The Arrow Maker, written in 1911, about the devaluation of women's talents. Austin also wrote a novel titled A Woman of Genius, which describes how traditional marriages can stifle women's creativity. In addition to this manuscript, Austin also wrote Greatness in Women in 1923 and A Woman Looks at Her World in 1924.

It is apparent that Mary Austin had a significant impact on the life of Mary Hunter Wolf, as did her childhood friend, Agnes de Mille, with whom she remained close friends all of her life. De Mille became Mary’s friend when they attended the Hollywood School for Girls and they were involved in drama productions and theater games together. Agnes de Mille often asked Mary to accompany her to the theater, as her father was a producer and director of the earliest Hollywood films, including Four Horseman with Rudolph Valentino. During summers while she was in high school, Mary worked in a Hollywood theater where de Mille’s father was producing films. After her high school graduation, Mary left California to attend Wellesley but was surprised at the prep school mentality she encountered at Wellesley and the lack of social consciousness of the student body in the 1920s. She continued to be involved in theater productions at Wellesley, but left college after her junior year because of health problems and spent the next few years with her aunt in New Mexico. There she lived, taught, and acted as a secretary for her aunt until moving to Chicago to finish college and begin her theater work. She worked temporarily as a sales clerk and a radio talk show host, and eventually landed the part of “Marge” in Easy Aces, a radio comedy show that was nearly as famous as the Amos and Andy Show.
While living in Chicago, Mary married a law student, joined the socialist party, and subsequently moved to New York with the troupe involved in *Easy Aces*. With the Depression, many of her friends were out of work, so Mary was thrilled to have a steady income. Her husband finished law school and remained in Chicago for about a year before joining Mary in New York. Unfortunately, and because of, she believed, the rise in her income as compared with her husband’s, the marriage began to disintegrate and eventually ended as her career began to peak. From 1938 to 1944, she directed six stage productions for the American Actors Company, which she had helped to found. From 1944 to 1955 she directed five Broadway productions and assisted with a sixth. She worked with Jerome Robbins on *Peter Pan*, and helped nurture the careers of several choreographers playwrights, including Tennessee Williams. She was one of a group of nine female directors in the U.S. who directed but did not act, all of whom were single and childless.

At the height of her directing and theater career in New York City, two friends from her years in Chicago reentered her life. Mary had maintained a very close relationship with these friends, who were married and lived in Connecticut with their three young children. Then tragedy struck, and the husband was widowed and left with children to raise by himself. Mary recalled that considerable pressure was put on her to marry her friend and become a stepmother to the three children, who were eleven, eight and five. She left New York, moved to Connecticut, married, and became a mother to the children, who were, she recalled, in “terrible shape and needed her very much.” She remembered this time as fascinating, difficult, absorbing, and creative. Although her life had changed drastically, she sought other creative challenges in the schools and the community, working with disadvantaged youngsters in the urban areas. Mary described this period of her life as a time when she gave support and love to both her husband and the children.

Her husband decided to end the marriage after ten years, having fallen in love with someone else. Mary was initially very hurt, but what troubled her more was that he also tried to end her relationship with her children, who by then regarded Mary as their mother. By this time, she had been away from the theater for so long that she could not simply return to Broadway as a director and producer. Additionally, as she emphasized, she could not consider leaving Connecticut because her children were there and she believed that they still needed her. When asked if she had any regrets about having left Broadway at the peak of her career, she exclaimed with surprise: “Regrets? How could I have regrets? If I had not married him, I would not have had my children.”

Rather than feel bitterness about what had happened with her marriages, Mary described these times in her life as “creative passages” affected positively by the impact of caring for three children and adjusting
Feminist Perspectives on Talent Development

to a new husband at the age of 50, which she described as stimulating. For decades following her divorce, she remained close to her children and entered a new phase in her life, dedicating her talents and energies to urban arts education. She was active in the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, eventually serving as chair. She was a producer for the American Shakespeare Festival Theater (ASFT), for which she developed education outreach programs for schools. She started an innovative counseling program, which later became a model program in the country, using theater techniques with students who were economically disadvantaged. She also kept many of her New York connections, including her relationships with Agnes de Mille, Jerome Robbins, and many other actors, choreographers, directors, producers, and people associated with the theater. She moved to New Haven, which allowed her greater access to New York City, and she embarked on new challenges, including starting innovative theater programs that are still active today, three years after her death.

Joan Tower, American Composer (1938–)

Joan Tower, known as one of the leading American composers of the modern period, is an energetic, attractive woman with brown hair and a wide smile. She is humble, laughs quickly, and often jokes about herself. Her father was a mining engineer who played the violin, and her mother, a housewife, played the piano. Joan had a sister who was nine years older and a brother who was nine years younger. She attended public schools and began piano lessons when she was six, and when she was nine, the family moved to Bolivia, where her father had accepted a job as a mine supervisor. Joan’s older sister remained in the States to attend college and her brother was a baby, so she felt somewhat alone as she adjusted to a new home, a new language, and a new environment. She interacted frequently with the native Bolivians who worked with her family and attended festivals celebrating religious holidays and other events, where she remembers hearing different types of musical instruments. She also traveled with her father on business, sometimes riding on llamas to the mines. Joan’s piano teacher in Bolivia held high expectations for her, including frequent practice. She recalls that music was always a part of her life. Her family would often gather around the piano after dinner, where her father played the violin or sang, her mother played the piano, and Joan would improvise on South American percussion instruments.

She loved horses and often rode for enjoyment, convincing her father to buy her a racehorse, which was affordable in Bolivia. She admitted that she was rebellious in school and when her family returned to the United States, Joan completed her last two years in a boarding school, where she continued piano lessons and practiced for several hours each day.
She pursued her musical interests while attending Bennington College in Vermont, where she completed her first musical composition as an assigned class project. She graduated from Bennington in 1961 and moved to New York City, where she became a graduate student in composition at Columbia University. She earned a master’s degree in 1964 and her doctoral degree in music in 1978. Joan supported herself by giving piano lessons and forming a chamber group, the De Capo Chamber Players, devoted to performing new pieces of music. In addition, she organized a series of contemporary music concerts and raised the money to hire the musicians. She wrote one new composition each season for the series, which provided the opportunity for her to hear her own music performed. The chamber group she started became very well known, produced several recordings, performed all over the world, and premiered over 100 new works.

By 1985, Joan had composed more than 17 pieces, including solos for clarinet, violin, and flute, and a number of pieces for multiple instruments. Her first work for orchestra, Sequoia, written in 1981, became extremely successful, having been played by 30 orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic. Reviews of her work have appeared in major newspapers, journals, magazines, and music periodicals, and she has received numerous awards, commissions, fellowships, and grants from the Guggenheim, Fromm, Naumburg, Koussevitzky, and Jerome Foundations. She was profiled in an award winning PBS documentary and major symphonies continue to perform her work. Recently, one of her compositions, Silver Ladders, competed against 140 other new orchestral works to win the Grawemeyer Award, the largest cash prize award in music. She has had a long-term relationship with a man with whom she has lived for almost 30 years (whom she married in 2001), and has never had children. She has many commissions, and admits that on the days of the week she is not teaching, she often spends seven or eight hours a day composing. She does not like to take time off from her work and feels an obligation to be a female composer who continues to contribute. “We still have such a long way to go,” she explained. “I mean, just look at the statistics. How many pieces by women composers do you know? And how many do you really know? The musicology network is still overwhelmingly a male network. I mean, the standard music history textbook – the Grout History of Music – listed two women. That’s for the whole history of music.”

In more recent years, her work has gained even more prestige. Her Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman (No. 1) has been played by more than 500 different ensembles since its 1987 premiere and is recorded on RCA (Saint Louis Symphony/Slatkin). The Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Fanfares were commissioned respectively by Absolut Vodka, Carnegie Hall, the Kansas City Symphony, and the Aspen Music Festival. She has many recent commissions and she has conducted at the White House (Celebration from Stepping Stones), the Scotia Festival in Canada, the Fairbanks Symphony, the Hudson Valley Philharmonic, and the American Symphony Orchestra.
Feminist Perspectives on Talent Development

Tower has been the subject of television documentaries on WGBH (Boston), CBS Sunday Morning, and MJW Productions (England). Her second and third quartets (*In Memory* and *Incandescent*) have toured throughout the world with the Tokyo and Emerson Quartets.

In 1998, she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and in 2004 to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She continues as the Asher Edelman Professor of Music at Bard College, where she has taught since 1972, and she has interesting views about female composers: “I think some people are not aware that there are no women composers in their concerts. So for that reason, I do like to be reminded, this is a woman composer. Other than that, music is the music and the fact that I’m a woman doesn’t make a difference to the music.” She also believes that it is important to remind people that there are women who can compose and that the public can buy their records. She feels strongly that she needs to help other women as a mentor and role model, and that progress is slow because “there are a lot of women out there who are very passive” and, as she explained:

they are more critical of their talent than their male counterparts. If male composers feel that way they certainly don’t broadcast it. But there’s a problem with that. Women don’t have a lot of role models certainly, especially among dead composers, and they don’t have enough of a support system within their own community. So they have to forge their way very much by themselves and some of them just don’t have the strength to do this.

RESEARCH THEMES ABOUT TALENTED AND EMINENT WOMEN

In a society in which the majority of our inventors, leaders, politicians, artists, and musicians have been male, how does a woman develop a philosophical belief about her own potential and the support system needed for high levels of creative work? How might she overcome her upbringing, her parents’ and teachers’ advice and imprinting on her manners and personal characteristics, and the knowledge that high-level contributions take large blocks of time away from those she loves? When Maria Goeppart-Mayer made the discovery that later resulted in a Nobel Prize, she delayed publishing her results for months. A biographer concluded that modesty may have caused this delay (Dash, 1973, p. 322); however, Goeppart-Mayer’s hesitation may also reflect a fear of failure or even the intrinsic belief imposed on highly able women by our society – that discoveries, inventions, and creations are usually the work of men. Until many more women are visible as discoverers, inventors, composers, or creators, they may be relegated to the roles they have traditionally held – implementers of others’ ideas, organizers, service providers, and the painters of the backdrop of creation. Only more research about women of accomplishment and those with high potential who do not achieve work at the highest levels will enable a better understanding of these complex
variables. To help frame a future direction for this research, I have classified the relatively sparse research focusing on the development of women’s talents into four major themes.

**Theme One: Personality Characteristics of Talented Women**

The first theme relates to the identification of personality characteristics of talented women and the study of these characteristics as a means of learning what may be necessary to develop talents. Research in this area generally falls under the umbrella of historical views using retrospective analyses or contemporary research about talented women, such as the eminent women discussed earlier in this chapter. When they conduct historical research, researchers use biographical works to identify common personality factors of famous women writers, scientists, and artists (e.g. Antler, 1987; Dash, 1988; Gabor, 1995). Both retrospective and contemporary analyses generally identify personality factors such as the persistence to overcome challenges or problems, independence, and a willingness to live a life different from their peers’ or counterparts’. Wallace and Wahlberg (1995), for example, attempted to identify the early conditions of successful adult females by using a historical analysis of traits. As girls, notable women were intelligent, hardworking, imaginative, and strong willed. In addition, girls who became famous writers were more apt to question assumptions and conventions than were those who became notable artists, scientists, lawyers, and politicians. Helson (1996) described the personality characteristics of creative female mathematicians as compared with males as highly flexible, original, and able to reject outside influences. She also found that they were rebellious, independent, introverted, and flexible, both in their general attitudes and in their mathematical work. A summary of pertinent research that identifies personal characteristics of gifted and talented women suggests the existence of several common personality characteristics (Wasserman, 2000; Kennedy & McConnell, 2001; Arnold, Noble & Subotnik, 1996; Linehan, 2001; Omar & Davidson, 2001; Dash, 1973; Reis, 1998; 2002; Bateson, 1990; Wallace & Wahlberg, 1995; Ajzenberg-Selove, F., 1994; Oppenheimer, 1988). These include task commitment, resilience, and determination; individualism; openness to exploration of wide range of interests; creativity and risk-taking; ability to maintain focus despite diversity of interests; and energy and excitement about work.

**Theme Two: Internal and External Barriers that Impede the Development of Women’s Talents and Gifts**

The second research theme relates to barriers that may impede the development of women’s talents. Research with high-potential women suggests
that internal, personal barriers as well as external barriers hinder the completion of high-level work (Arnold & Denny, 1985; Callahan, 1979; Hollinger & Fleming, 1988; Kerr, 1985; Ochse, 1991; Piirto, 1991; Reis, 1987, 1998; Subotnik & Arnold, 1995). External barriers include the way women were raised as children and the cultural messages they encounter in life; external barriers contribute to internal barriers. These internal barriers are often deeply personal; for example, an artist explained that her children had caused her to put her sculpting talents on hold: “I have spent the last 25 years sculpting my three children. They have taken every ounce of my creativity, and there has been little left, either in talent, time, or creative energy, for my other work” (Reis, 1998). Although she had difficulty saying this, she did explain that she sometimes wondered what might have happened to her artistic talent if she had decided not to have children.

Research about these external barriers can also be historical or contemporary. Historical explanations posit that women were often underrated or ignored in history, perhaps because many girls were not encouraged or allowed to engage in intellectual pursuits. They usually received less education than boys, and were often denied access to teachers and opportunities to develop their potential. In the past, women, especially minority women, undoubtedly received little encouragement, stimulation, and access to the tools necessary for building intellectual skills and developing the ability to create something of cultural value. Women were regarded as less able than males to creatively use their intellectual skills, and if they attempted to do so, they often expressed constraints in their personal lives (Reis, 1998). Contemporary explanations raise questions about why women do not follow their interests into career preparation, or place more importance on the works they produce (Arnold, 1995; Callahan, 1979; Kerr, 1985; Reis, 1987; 1998). The problem may be further exacerbated for women who do produce original, creative work, as they are more conscious of criticism than men and find it more difficult to deal with negative perceptions of their work (Baer, 1997; Roberts, 1991; Roberts & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994; Reis, 1998). The importance of relationships and guilt about putting work ahead of personal relationships appears to be the most compelling and frequently mentioned internal barrier (Arnold, 1995; Reis, 1998). Other external barriers include multiple demands on time, feelings of guilt when they attempt to work during time that others (mothers, sisters, friends) tell them should be spent with family, or in some cases, lack of support, negative perceptions of others, difficulty in work environments, and a lack of interest in working alone for the periods of time necessary for creative accomplishment (Callahan, 1979; Kerr, 1985; Ochse, 1991; Piirto, 1991; Reis, 1987; 1998). During the same years in which Lehman (1953) found the height of male creative productivity to occur, women’s responsibilities to children increase (Reis, 1998). Some
contemporary researchers have also noted that in our society, exceptionally able women experience considerable stress related to role conflict and overload, which may reduce creative urges (Ochse, 1991; Piirto, 1991; Reis, 1987; 1998).

A summary of selected research on internal and external barriers suggests that several internal and external factors commonly affect talented women (Knights & Richards, 2003; Reis, 2002; Linehan, 2001; Nelson & Burke, 2002; Wasserman, 2000; O’Donovan-Polter, 2001; Omar & Davidson, 2001; Arnold, Noble, & Subotnik, 1996; Reis, 1998; Bateson, 1990; Oppenheimer, 1988; Dash, 1973). Internal factors include: focus on the importance of relationships over achievement; internalization of external values and gender role definitions; feelings of loneliness, isolation, and lack of support; devaluing of one’s own abilities and self-sabotage; and unrealistic expectations. A summary of external barriers (Wasserman, 2000; Kennedy & McConnell, 2001; O’Donovan-Polter, 2001; Burke, 2001a; Linehan, 2001; Omar & Davidson, 2001; Knights & Richards, 2003; Arnold, Noble, & Subotnik, 1996; Dash, 1973; Reis, 1998; Nelson & Burke, 2002; Reis, 2001; 2002; Oppenheimer, 1988; Bateson, 1990; Hardwick, 1990) includes the nature of choices between work and family; lack of support for achievement and ambition from family and friends; absence or negative influence of other women in the workplace; colleagues’ negative perception of women in professional settings; and the negative effects of the general social perception of women’s abilities and roles.

Theme Three: Factors that Enable Talented Women to Succeed

Women who achieve eminence often display single-minded purpose, make difficult choices about personal lives (including decisions to divorce or not to marry, to have fewer children or none at all, to live alone, etc.) and create support systems (including, for example, supportive spouses) to enable their creative productivity to emerge. Decisions are usually consciously made to support the adaptation of a lifestyle conducive to the production of highly challenging work. In research examining how highly creative female artists develop their talents, List and Renzulli (1991) found that they had generally supportive families, at least one influential mentor in their lives, a strong, personal drive to create, and a need to share their products with appropriate audiences. Roscher (1987) studied successful scientists who attributed part of their accomplishments to a role model, whether during high school or college, or an individual professor or family member who provided encouragement. The women who married also attributed their continued success to the encouragement of their spouse, often a scientist, who recognized the sacrifices necessary for success. In some cases, talented women such as Shirley Jackson and Maria Mayer were almost
“bullied” into producing work that their husbands believed would be noteworthy.

Theme Four: Differences Between Women’s and Men’s Work Process and Product

The last theme relates to gender differences that exist in work products and creative work processes. Some researchers have called for changes in the paradigm of how we view women and talent development, and the need for changes in society that could facilitate the development of high potential in women (Bateson, 1990; Kirschenbaum & Reis, 1997). Women have made and continue to make many creative contributions that are different from the accomplishments made by men, yet men’s creative accomplishments seem to be valued more by society (Reis, 1987; 1995; 1996; 1998). The accomplishments of women may not reflect the form of creative productivity that results in awards, prizes, books, articles, art, patents, professional stature, and financial gain. Rather, their creative efforts may differ from those of their male counterparts.

Because women’s life experiences in society may be vastly different from men’s, (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976), it seems logical that differences in process and productivity also exist. For example, some female artists believe that the creative growth gained from both childbirth and parenting can actually contribute to creative growth in their art (Kirschenbaum & Reis, 1997). One highly productive female scientist with several patents and more than 100 scientific papers acknowledged that she did her research in addition to being the dean of science in a highly competitive university. She carried the responsibility for almost 100 faculty members, more than $20 million in budget and grants, and she ran a large lab on her own research initiatives. She was committed to having more economically disadvantaged and culturally diverse students become scientists and a critical part of her work continued to be the mentoring of young, talented African American students from urban high schools. She explained that she was very efficient and could engage in multiple tasks. On weekends, she did not continue with her academic work but rather pursued another love, gardening. She had three children who had all graduated from college and were successful in their lives, and a loving relationship with her husband, an architect, who explained that his work had always been secondary to that of his wife. They had been happily married for 30 years. She may never win a Nobel Prize, but she chose, like many other highly accomplished women, to diversify her talents, applying them to her lab, her work as an administrator and professor, her role as a mentor to economically disadvantaged students, her spouse and children, and her interests and hobbies, especially her gardening. She did this because all of these areas brought her joy, she explained, and because she felt a
sense of responsibility across all of these areas, particularly in her relationships with her family, her graduate students and faculty, and her high school students, many of whom pursued graduate work in her area of science.

Perhaps the most controversial issue related to women and their work process is the claim that there may be a potential mismatch between the single-minded devotion necessary for creative accomplishment and either their personalities or their need and desire to balance family and career (Piirto, 1991; Subotnik & Arnold, 1995). In fact, many women have the potential to display single-minded devotion to their work but they choose to diversify their creative efforts as did Mary Hunter Wolf and the scientist described previously (Reis, 2002b).

Recent research (Reis, 1987, 1995; 1996; 1998) has demonstrated that some women’s talents are diversified across multiple areas in their lives (foxes, rather than hedgehogs), including relationships, work related to family and home, personal interests, aesthetic sensitivities, and appearances. This diversification of their creative talents emerges in their work but also in other areas including relationships with family and friends, and in the ways they decorate their homes, prepare meals, plan complicated schedules for their families, balance time between work and personal life, and stretch the family budget. When asked about various periods of high-level productivity in her life shortly before she died, Mary Hunter Wolf discussed her beliefs about the ways in which women’s creative work evolved in a different pattern than men’s:

Women spend their lives moving from one creative act to another and they find satisfaction from their creative expression in many different outlets. I have found that men, on the other hand, see an end goal and move directly toward the pursuit of that creative goal. That is why men are able to achieve goals and fame more quickly than women, but I think that women have a richer creative journey, find joy in the diversity of their creative acts, and in the end, enjoy the creative process and their own talents so much more.

Perhaps because women have had to struggle to find a place for themselves in work situations, they have not yet had the time or experience to be able to engage in the single-minded devotion to work that men have had. Perhaps the barriers that they have experienced over time have led to the need to diversify their talents (Kirschenbaum & Reis, 1997; List and Renzulli, 1991; Ochse, 1991; Piirto, 1991; Reis, 1987; 1995; 1996; 1998; Roscher, 1987), or it may be that they simply prefer the diverse expressions of their creativity and talent.

The creative process in women may emerge differently than in men and their creative work products may also differ. Female writers, artists, scientists, and creators in all domains interact primarily with male standards of productivity that have been accepted as the standard within a
domain, but may actually only be the standard for male creators (Reis, 1998). Therefore, until more women are able to produce in more areas, their productivity may be lower. A synthesis of some research reviewed in this chapter also suggests that the work process of talented women focuses more on team building, integrating personal relationships with their careers, and understanding – without accepting – the reality of higher workloads accompanied by lower status in their work environment. These women also pursue, with intensity, the social responsibilities related to their work and the impact of this work on the betterment of society.

IDENTIFYING AND SERVING GIFTED GIRLS IN SCHOOL

It is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss gifted girls without discussing gifted women, because many young gifted girls believe that they can “do it all” or “have it all,” whereas many older gifted females have learned that they cannot. Many gifted girls excelled in school, but as they grew older, ambivalence about their future caused their hopes and career dreams to waiver. As one talented woman who was a high school valedictorian explained in an interview, “I used to think I could become president. I was so supremely confident and so positive I would succeed. Now, I work part-time in a non-challenging job, take care of my three kids, go to the grocery store, and try to finish the laundry by Sunday night so they will all have clean clothes for school on Monday. I just don’t know how all of this happened” (Reis, 1995). Understanding more about why hope fades is one reason that research about gifted girls and women continues; another is to add to the intriguing discussion about why early precocity often does not translate into eminence in later life.

Research indicates that both belief in ability and self-confidence of talented females is undermined or diminished during childhood or adolescence. In one qualitative study, not one gifted girl attributed her success in school to extraordinary ability (Callahan, Cunningham, & Plucker, 1994). Other research has indicated that despite a degree of “feminine modesty,” some gifted females have realistic fears and diminished self-confidence about the future (Reis, Hébert, Diaz, Maxfield, & Ratley, 1995). What factors help some smart young girls become self-fulfilled, talented adults who can achieve at high levels and enjoy personal happiness? Some studies of gifted women summarized in this chapter provide suggestions about how to enhance the experiences of smart girls during childhood and adolescence to help increase the likelihood that they will achieve their dreams. First, they should be identified as having talents and encouraged to engage in as many enriching opportunities as possible to expose them to a wide range of experiences, such as those suggested in our work on the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli & Reis, 1985; 1997). Identification should be based on interests and on a broad range of talents, including those relating
to social action. Diverse opportunities for creative–productive work should be provided, including competitions like History Day and experiences such as Girl Scouts and summer programs that expose young girls to multiple areas of interest (Reis, 1998; Rimm, 1999). In particular, younger gifted girls should have the chance to discuss what happens to older gifted women of accomplishment, to hear their stories and their ideas, and to learn from them. They should be able to read biographies and autobiographies of these women and to learn from their experiences about the windmills they saw and conquered. Suggested opportunities, resources, and encouragement for gifted girls are summarized in a book written about this topic (Reis, 1998).

CONCLUSION

The reasons for the successful accomplishments of some talented girls and women and the failure of others to realize their high potential in meaningful work are complex and depend on many factors including values, personal choices, and sociocultural forces. Today, in our current societal structure, a strong possibility exists that many talented females, especially those who are married and have children, may not produce the same level of work as their male counterparts. Therefore, the realization of women’s talents may need to be redefined or expanded to include, for example, the joy of accomplishment as they pursue a career that still allows time for a satisfying personal life, the nurturing of children and family, or the success of being outstanding in an area outside of professional work (Reis, 1987). Yet, although the importance of these types of contributions cannot be underestimated and may be essential for societal well-being, they are simply not enough for many talented women who have a sense of destiny about their own potential to produce meaningful work that makes a difference (Reis, 1998). Some of these women make active choices to pursue their talents because they have a sense of destiny about the importance of their work. With societal changes in the role of men, more women may seek and find partners who are more willing to support their hopes and dreams, assuming more of the responsibilities for children, home, and community. Women, of course, will have to be willing to gracefully accept and celebrate these partnerships.

The experiences of the eminent women described in this chapter suggest that many personal choices and barriers confronted this diverse group. The development of a creatively productive life is intricate and complex, and decidedly personal. What one regarded as an obstacle, another perceived as an intriguing challenge. Some were negatively influenced by their parents’ lack of support and withdrew from relationships; others used this anger and rebelled, and eventually became eminent in their selected area of endeavor. The ways in which the same barriers differentially affect talented
women provides the fascination about conducting research on the individual paths they follow to achieve high levels of accomplishment. Not all gifted females experience the same barriers, but my research suggests a combination of the following that occur across the lifespan and differentially affect productivity at different ages and stages: personality characteristics such as modesty, dilemmas about abilities and talents, personal decisions about family, and decisions about duty and caring (putting the needs of others first) as opposed to nurturing personal, religious, and social issues. Some of these dilemmas cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of everyone involved. Rather, they shift or are eliminated when changes occur in a woman’s life, such as when her children grow up, her marriage ends, a new relationship starts, or she changes a home or work environment.

If our society is to more actively support talented girls and adult women to realize their abilities and potential, work environments must be altered and we must support diversity of life choices. All of the eminent women that I studied were able to combine meaningful work with what they considered to be a content personal life, and most achieved some level of harmony and balance among their talents, their personal lives, and their contributions to society. Perhaps it is the importance of relationships and care that creates this balance and it may be that this same priority will eventually be as critical to men. It seems clear that it is becoming that way. But the barriers still exist for women in our society, as talented women “opt out” as they tire of the struggle between work and family in what has been called a revolution (Belkin, 2003). Virginia Woolf wrote that we must slay the angel in the house and the censor within us. Speaking out, asking why, and developing the courage to create are all essential to the emergence of feminist talents that will not be manifested in a singular voice or a similar form to men’s, but rather in a multitude of voices and forms. A celebration of these and a realization of the need for meaningful work that makes a difference will help more talented women create their own unique voice and form. Although it is impossible to measure how many talented women underachieve, we can listen carefully to older women of high potential who look back at their lives with feelings of regret and say: “I might have, but…” or “I could have if…” or “I never had time to…” Our society needs this talent source today in many roles, and it is time for us to benefit more fully from the changes that may occur in the environment, politics, healthcare, technology, legislation, science, art, music, and other areas if more talented women are able to emerge as leaders and producers.

References


Feminist Perspectives on Talent Development

Sally M. Reis


Feminist Perspectives on Talent Development


