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PREVIEW

CARING AS GIFTEDNESS:
EXAMINING CONCEPTIONS OF GIFTEDNESS

by

James D. Curtiss

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Interdepartmental Area of
Major: Administration, Curriculum, and Instruction

Under the Supervision of Professor Karl D. Hostetler

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Caring As Giftedness:

Examining Conceptions of Giftedness

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GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

CARING AS GIFTEDNESS:
EXAMINING CONCEPTIONS OF GIFTEDNESS

James D. Curtiss, Ph.D.
University of Nebraska, 1997

Advisor: Karl Hostetler

The purpose of this dissertation is to consider Nel Noddings' conception of caring and the implications it has for conceptions of giftedness commonly operationalized as criteria for including children in gifted programs in our schools. Current conceptions of giftedness commonly consist of general definitions of giftedness along with qualities and characteristics assumed to be predictive of future success, personal fulfillment and benefit to society. I will advocate recognition of valuable qualities suggested by Noddings in her description of caring as manifestations of giftedness. In addition, I will consider the implications that recognizing caring as gifted might have for the identification and education of gifted girls and women.

Typically, giftedness is understood as a psychological construct. However, decisions made by educators about including children in special programs for the gifted have strong ethical components and implications. Since the conceptualization of "caring" is, for the most part, philosophically based; and because of the ethical issues involved in judgments about what is recognized as gifted, it is appropriate to conduct this study in that milieu. Therefore, I will adopt the form of a philosophical treatise for this dissertation. One approach to philosophical

research is to analyze concepts and to consider possible relationships and connections between or among concepts. Another function of philosophical writing is attempting to identify unrecognized assumptions in practices which can help to inform our thinking as to attitudes and values inherent in the assumptions in question. In so doing, the intent is not to provide empirical proof for the ideas advanced in the treatise, but rather to offer a philosophically justified and literature based explanation for the plausibility of an argument.

The ideas advanced will be grounded in literature on both gifted education and feminine ethics. However, I will suggest and present my own interpretation of these ideas for the reader's consideration and will hopefully contribute to the understanding of any relationships that might exist among concepts being considered.

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CHAPTER ONE

GIFTEDNESS, CARING, AND ETHICAL PRACTICE

Noddings argues that school curricula should be centered on caring relationships and that "the main aim of education should be to produce competent, caring, loving, and lovable people."¹ I wish to support this claim by advocating for Noddings' caring as a recognized form and/or expression of giftedness. Successful advocacy of caring as gifted will entail answering two fundamental questions: Why should caring be recognized as giftedness; and how should caring be recognized as gifted?

Addressing the "why" question, I will show that high levels of caring are badly needed in schools and in society. Because gifted individuals are apt to contribute the most to fulfilling this need, those school children possessing potential for giftedness in caring should be identified and have their potential nurtured. In addition, I will argue that some number of students possess a high potential for caring and that this potential should be nurtured to ensure that these students are able to fulfill their potential. A high level of caring potential should be recognized as giftedness in any child, but in the name of justice and equal

¹Nel Noddings, "A Morally Defensible Mission for Schools in the 21st Century," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 76, No. 5 (January, 1995): 365.

opportunity, this recognition is especially important and applicable to the identification of gifted girls and women.

An additional issue involved in the "why" question has to do with making conceptions of giftedness conceptually complete and sound. I will argue that conceptions of giftedness that fail to include an explicit reference to caring neglect an important manifestation and expression of potential giftedness and are therefore incomplete and unsound.

In answer to the "how" question, I will examine current conceptions of giftedness, considering ways to integrate potential giftedness in caring. The premise of my analysis is that both caring and giftedness are, in part, socially constructed. Gifted is the name we give to a set of qualities partly determined by the community that identifies it and is not sufficiently or exclusively defined by scientific proof or experimental verification.² That is, fundamental abilities likely have an element of verifiable biological basis but are developed and valued according to the needs of the culture in which they are manifest. Similarly, feminine theories³ of caring derive principally from culturally defined concepts of gender, not sufficiently explained by biological necessity. Again, caring is likely a naturally occurring human capacity, but its development is

² Robert J. Sternberg and Janet E. Davidson, Eds., *Conceptions of Giftedness*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

³ The connection between caring and femininity will be made later in this dissertation.

contingent upon cultural factors. Both gender and giftedness are created out of a complex dynamic of interwoven cognitive, emotional, and social forces. I will need to consider the way that this dynamic unfortunately supports both the traditional association of giftedness with masculinity and the equally traditional disjunction between giftedness and femininity.⁴

Educators identify giftedness in children using conceptions of giftedness as identification criteria. Current conceptions of giftedness most often consist of a general definition of giftedness along with a number of qualities, abilities, aptitudes, talents, and/or capacities believed to be characteristic of giftedness. I will first suggest that caring might be recognized as an additional quality of giftedness. In addition, I will argue that caring could be recognized as an alternate expression or manifestation of qualities (e.g., intelligence, motivation, creativity) already commonly associated with giftedness. Both views are viable alternatives for including caring in conceptions of giftedness. I will not favor one or the

⁴ Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 4. Controversy exists in this area. Some feminist theorists posit primarily a biological basis for caring. For example, see Sarah Ruddick, "Extract from Maternal Thinking," in *Ethics: A feminist reader*. ed. E. Frazer, J. Hornsby, & S. Lovibond (Cambridge MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992). For a culturally based view of caring see P. W. Scaltsas, "Do feminist ethics counter feminist aims?" In *Explorations in Feminist Ethics*, ed. E. B. Cole & S. Coultrap-McQuin (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992). All would agree that both factors are present in caring. For example, while Noddings claims caring is natural in everyone, she also recognizes that the caring capacity is developed in a socio-cultural setting.

other, but will explore some possible advantages of each as I advocate the importance of caring in giftedness.

To begin developing these arguments, I will first briefly explain the concept of caring as defined by Noddings. Hopefully, a deeper understanding of Noddings' concept of caring will emerge from the ensuing analysis, but it will be useful to develop some basic understandings at the outset.

The Caring Capacity

Noddings takes the position that the primary aim of life is "caring and being cared for in the human domain and full receptivity and engagement in the nonhuman world."⁵ She continues in this vein by ascribing to schools the maintenance and enhancement of caring as their primary aim. Noddings acknowledges that, although caring is as natural in humans as breathing, people have various capacities for caring. Nearly all children have a capacity for caring, but this potential, whether inborn, a product of environment or some kind of interaction between the two, differs among individuals.⁶

Caring was first conceived by Noddings in terms of ethics and moral education. Although caring is natural, she claimed that the caring ethic should be developed in school children. She posited an ethical perspective that, in her

⁵ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 174.

⁶ Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 17.

view is more faithful to the moral experiences of women. This moral perspective emphasizes personal relations, nurturance and caring, maternal experience, emotional responsiveness, attunement to particular others in actual contexts, and the limited usefulness of principles in the resolution of moral problems. The ethic of care and responsibility that reflects these concerns and understandings was offered by Noddings as an alternative to the deductive, calculative approach to moral decision making said to be characteristic of dominant moral theories.⁷

Noddings has subsequently expanded her application of the caring concept to education as a whole, adding general educational aims, goals, and curriculum to the discussion of moral education.⁸ In so doing, Noddings emphasizes the desirability of developing caring in children, specifically the enhancement of children's capacity to care.

I claim high levels of this capacity are identifiable and should be recognized as giftedness in children. So that high levels of caring capacity can be recognized as gifted, it is necessary to understand how Noddings' caring is different from more common uses of the word.

Noddings' definition of caring differs from common

⁷ J. Blustein, *Care and commitment: Taking the personal point of view* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3. Blustein gives an excellent description of the caring ethic as a critique of the dominant ethical perspectives, those in the tradition of Kant and Mill. However, he goes on to assert that caring in no way should be thought of as replacing traditional moral theory.

⁸ Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care In the Schools*.

definitions of the word in two aspects: engrossment and motivational displacement. Engrossment means open, nonselective receptivity to the cared-for. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive the other. When one cares, one really hears, sees, or feels what the other tries to convey. A common way of thinking about caring is to equate it with empathy. Noddings claims that empathy is the power of projecting one's personality into the other and fully understanding the other. Noddings' caring involves feeling with the other and receiving rather than projecting.

In the case of motivational displacement, the one who cares is not only engrossed in the other but gives over her own needs and desires in favor of the one who is cared for. In a caring encounter, the carer is concerned with the projects of the other. The carer's motive energy flows toward others and their projects. The carer is seized by the needs of the other. In common usage, caring often means that one takes care of the other's needs as the caretaker sees them. One takes care of the other by fulfilling her own agenda on his or her behalf. When viewed in this way, caring is more manipulative than it is nurturing.⁹ According to Noddings, engrossment and motivational displacement are aspects of two levels of caring: natural caring and ethical caring.

⁹ See Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* and Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*. For an exhaustive treatment of different ways of thinking about caring, see

According to Noddings, all humans care naturally. The ethic of caring arises and is developed from this natural caring. The foundation of ethical caring is the relation and affect of natural caring. Noddings describes the ethic of caring as founded upon two feelings, human caring and the memory of caring and being cared for. Natural caring is the first sentiment while the second occurs as a memory of natural caring and being cared for along with an accompanying imperative to respond to the first in spite of a conflicting desire to serve one's own interests. Natural caring results from human encounter and affective responses that are basic to human existence. Natural caring is an encounter or relation characterized by full receptivity, recognition and response.

Ethical caring, resulting from the recognition of the imperative or obligation to care, is the developed, idealized form of natural caring. The one caring feels an obligation to enter into a caring relationship. According to Noddings, the ethical person is obliged to accept the initial feeling and is required to respond to the initial caring impulse with an act of commitment. Carers commit themselves either to overt action on behalf of the cared-for or commit themselves to thinking about what they might do.

Both natural caring and ethical caring are enabled in people by the capacity to care. This capacity includes

Jeffrey Blustein, *Care and commitment: Taking the personal point of view* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

motivational and cognitive factors as well as affective and relational qualities. Although Noddings argued that emotion is a big part of moral reasoning and should be valued over completely cerebral and disconnected thinking, she emphasized that caring involves intellectual characteristics like reasoning and rationality:

Those of us who write about an ethic of care have emphasized affective factors, but this is not to say that caring is irrational or even nonrational. It has its own rationality or reasonableness, and in appropriate situations carers draw freely on standard linear rationality as well. But its emphasis is on living together, on creating, maintaining, and enhancing positive relations--not on decision making in moments of high moral conflict, nor on justification.¹⁰

Development of characteristic intellectual capacities, embedded in affect, relation, motivation, and connectedness play an important role in my advocacy of caring recognized as gifted.

Caring and Gifted Teaching

In order to illustrate and clarify what I mean by caring capacities and giftedness in caring, I will use as an example, the gifted teacher. Everyone knows that gifted teachers care for and about their students. Indeed, all teachers are charged with the obligation to take care of their students. However, gifted teaching demands more than taking care of students. According to Noddings:

.....teaching involves a meeting of one-caring and cared-for. I can lecture to hundreds, and this is neither inconsequential nor unimportant, but this is not teaching. To teach involves a giving of self and a receiving of other. I can receive, as one-caring, just so many, and I cannot reveal myself adequately through verbal symbols. I must explain, question, doubt, explore, revise,

¹⁰ Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, 21.

discover, err, and correct, but I must also receive, reflect, and act. Further, and especially, as one-caring I have a special obligation to maintain and enhance the ethical ideal of the cared-for. To do this, I need to know what it is, and I need to share mine. We must together consider what is right-in-this-case. No constraint on the way teaching is can remove the constraint on me as one-caring.¹¹

This sort of caring in teaching requires an attitude or an orientation that goes beyond mere caretaking or "caring" as it is commonly understood. In order to receive students fully, the teacher must apprehend their reality and be receptive to their motives rather than attempting to project her own agenda onto students.

Gifted teaching requires more than caretaking abilities and subject knowledge. The special skills, abilities, knowledge, and feelings involved in the caring capacity could be recognized as a distinct and unique gift. This kind of caring is a desirable quality of gifted teaching. Gifted teachers must have a well developed capacity to care and the capacity should be developed toward the ideal caring orientation. Furthermore, inadequacy of conceptions of giftedness to recognize the capacity to care and the potential for developing the caring orientation likely results in fewer teachers who really care in the way Noddings described.

Gifted Caring In Other Domains

Although I have used teaching as an example, gifted caring and the caring orientation is insufficiently

¹¹ Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*, 113.

recognized in other fields of endeavor. I believe that the capacity to care should be recognized and nurtured in all potentially gifted children and that the developed caring orientation can be expressed and is valuable in any occupation.¹²

Noddings advocates education that develops the capacity for caring in many different domains including caring for self, caring for others, caring for animals, plants, and the earth, caring for the human-made world, and caring for ideas. This suggests that the capacity to care and the gifts arising from it could and should be recognized and applied to any human occupation or endeavor or to any school subject, or to any definition of giftedness. In order to adequately understand caring as giftedness, I will need to examine just what gifted means.

Defining Giftedness

When asked how to identify a gifted child, most would probably respond initially by saying that a gifted children are demonstrably "smarter" than others their own age.

When the term giftedness is used, a certain stereotype comes to mind. Within this stereotype, giftedness is a single quality that is manifested throughout a person's intellectual performances. It is measurable by a single quantitative index, an IQ score. It is present as a potential from early in life, or it is never present; you either are gifted or you are not.¹³

¹² I have chosen teachers as exemplary because of my interest in teacher preparation and in qualities that I believe make teachers excellent. However, it is crucial to the discussion of how caring should be viewed as gifted that caring be understood outside the care taking domains.

¹³ Robert S. Siegler and Kenneth Kotovsky, "Two Levels of Giftedness: Shall Ever the Twain Meet?" in *Conceptions of Giftedness*, eds. Robert J.

We might say that this "smartness" in school children is manifested by how readily or quickly a student learns. We might say the person who learns the most is the most gifted. This seems a simple and intuitive response to the question of defining giftedness. In reality, this simple definition only raises more questions for educators. What does "smart" mean? Are smart and intelligent the same? How can we make the most of being smart? Is being smart the only way one can be gifted? Does being smart depend on the values of the culture in which it is manifest? Is ease of learning in school the only manifestation of smartness? Does being smart indicate greater potential for success or personal fulfillment? Educators must deal with all these questions and more in order to be fair and to foster the development of all students. If there are to be special educational opportunities for the gifted, then educators are obligated to choose wisely and fairly those who will be allowed to participate. Answering these questions wisely and fairly is the principal purpose of current conceptions of giftedness.

Attempts to define giftedness have ranged from the early conceptions of genius as a form of madness, through eminence as a reflection of socially valued productivity, to a focus on potential as indicated by qualities or characteristics predictive of future accomplishment.¹⁴ Current conceptions of

Sternberg and Janet E. Davidson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 417.

¹⁴ Patricia Haensly, Cecil Reynolds, and William R. Nash, "Giftedness: Coalescence, Context, Conflict, and Commitment," in *Conceptions of*

giftedness are many and varied. Sternberg and Davidson¹⁵ provided seventeen distinct conceptions of the giftedness construct and these seventeen are only representative of many others that exist.¹⁶ Although all are related in some aspects, each is also different in its focus or emphasis.

These conceptions of giftedness are commonly expressed and used as criteria for inclusion in special programs for the gifted.¹⁷ Conceptions of giftedness expressed and used in this way often consist of general definitions of giftedness along with qualities, characteristics, abilities, aptitudes, and/or capacities that predict future success, fulfillment and contribution to society. Differences in definition and in the qualities included reflect the varying focus and emphasis mentioned above. These differences in emphasis might affect the fair representation of females and other groups in gifted education. Thus, educators are faced with a

Giftedness eds. Robert J. Sternberg and Janet E. Davidson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 128-148.

¹⁵ Robert J. Sternberg and Janet E. Davidson, *Conceptions of Giftedness*.

¹⁶ Notable among these are conceptions of giftedness advanced by Francoys Gagne, "Toward a differentiated model of giftedness and talent," in *Handbook of Gifted Education*, ed. Nicholas Colangelo and Gary A. Davis, (Boston MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1991).

¹⁷ An additional issue involved in identifying gifted children is the determination of the amount or degree of a particular quality a child needs in order to qualify for gifted programming. For example, a certain degree of intelligence, motivation, or creativity is commonly required for identification of giftedness. In the case of caring as giftedness, educators might attempt to assess the degree or extent of a child's ability or motivation to care. I will not attempt to address this issue, but will be concerned with conceptual differences in the meaning of qualities like intelligence and motivation and how caring, as defined by Noddings, might be included.

myriad of difficult choices when making identification decisions.

Caring, Giftedness, and Females

Although Noddings does not limit the caring capacity to girls and women, she did identify the caring ethic as arising from qualities and abilities traditionally associated with women. Like Noddings, I will not claim that gifted caring is exclusively the province of girls and women. Certainly many boys and men care in the way Noddings suggested. Also, I will make no claims concerning the prevalence of caring in boys or girls. On the other hand, I will claim that failing to recognize the caring capacity in conceptions of giftedness has had an impact on the identification and development of gifted girls.

With the quality of caring, the caring capacity, and female students in mind, I will extend some of Noddings' arguments to include conceptions of giftedness and offer an analysis of their effect on the practice of identifying children for inclusion in programs for the gifted.

Overview of the Project

In Chapter Two, my intent will be to establish a rationale for including Noddings' caring in conceptions of giftedness. In other words, I will examine the question of "why" caring should be included in fairness to all students. Two arguments are commonly advanced justifying identification

and programming for gifted children. I will argue that caring should be included according to both rationales.

In Chapter Three, I will examine the issue of "why" caring should be included in conceptions of giftedness in the interests of conceptual integrity. In so doing, I will also begin my explanation of how caring might be integrated into conceptions of giftedness. I will provide a degree of focus by limiting my discussion of giftedness to the identification and nurturing of school children. The issue on which I wish to focus concerns the qualities and characteristics that educators recognize as gifted in students. I will define giftedness limited in this way as potential predictive of future success, personal fulfillment, and contribution to society. Some of the difficulties associated with identifying giftedness in school children will be explored. Next, an argument will be made for viewing giftedness as consisting of qualities and characteristics predictive of future success, fulfillment, and contribution. Third, I will outline the principal qualities and characteristics that are apparent in most conceptions and begin to explore the possibility of assumptions being made that leave out valuable characteristics that should be considered. The concept of giftedness in caring will be explored in connection with each of these issues.

Chapter Four will be a closer look at intelligence, one cluster of key characteristics commonly a part of conceptions

of giftedness. Some form or expression of intelligence, ability, talent, and skill are a part of virtually all conceptions of giftedness. My purpose will be to explore ways caring might be recognized as a component of intelligence.

Originally, intelligence and academic achievement were the sole measures used to identify giftedness in school children. Indeed, most identification procedures are still heavily dependent upon these two indicators. However, recent conceptions of giftedness have included both expanded concepts of intelligence and talents other than academic. For example, more emphasis has been placed on artistic talents as well as on personality traits such as leadership ability and curiosity. I will suggest that all of these can be expressed as intelligence. For example, intelligence is the ability to solve problems using the intellect. Creativity is the ability to interact intelligently with the environment in an original way.

Noddings suggested that morally centered abilities, the capacity to care and nurture, and the developing gifts arising from caring should be better recognized and more valued in schools. For example, Noddings suggested that traditional liberal education wrongly "...draws on only a narrow set of capabilities."¹⁸ Noddings has been critical of our educational values in terms of the education of all

¹⁸ Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in the Schools*, 28.