

# Meeting “The Highest of Adult Standards”: Exploring the Meaning to Society of Child Prodigies

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## Introduction

Much has been written about the abilities and accomplishments of child prodigies. Society celebrates them – and at times, gawks at and exploits them. Thanks in part to the news media, society has learned a great deal about their psychological makeup, and about the environmental factors that fuel their accomplishments. For example, parents often push and pressure prodigies, sometimes out of avarice. Life for child prodigies after they become adults can be trying and tumultuous. But little has been written about why child prodigies hold such fascination for the public or about the meaning the public takes away from the lionization of them and their accomplishments. Why, asks McCreery (1933), does society celebrate the individual “who astounds those about him when very young” (p. 9)? The dimensions of this reverence have not been explored. “That a public should be moved by the exploits of a little child is only natural,” asserted a *Music Educators Journal* contributor in 1953 (Franchere 1953, p. 31). How has it become common sense to be so moved? This research offers preliminary answers to this question by dissecting and analyzing reactions to the media representations of the prodigy’s experience.

## Review of the Literature

Prodigies, explain Ruthsatz and Detterman (2003) are “children under 10 years of age who perform culturally relevant tasks at a level that is rare even among highly trained professional adults in their field” (p. 510). The prodigy, wrote Howe (2000), “has made an unusually good start in life and displays exceptional capabilities while still a child” (p. 312). Winner (1996) offers a similar definition; a prodigy is “a more extreme version of a gifted child, a child so gifted that he or she performs at some domain at an adult level” (pp. 4-5). The distinction drawn by Winner is important, suggests David Feldman (1993), because it corrects a long and gradual narrowing of a still relatively new definition of prodigy to “a highly gifted or academically talented child.” Only within the last few decades have scholars begun to treat prodigies as worthy of extensive study “as one of the more striking manifestations of human potential,”

Feldman notes. Slowly, he claims, researchers moved away from treating prodigies as “freaks” and from relying on centuries of historical anecdotes to explain a prodigy’s abilities.

Early research on prodigies (e.g. Revesz 1925; Baumgarten 1930) revolved around their performance on intelligence tests and lists of their many attributes (Feldman & Morelock 2003; Shavinina 2010). Yet it was Baumgarten who suggested that external factors like family, education, and culture be explored if research on prodigies was to progress. Feldman’s (1986) “co-incidence” theory, developed in the mid-1980s, was based on the idea that “many sets of forces interact in the development and expression of human potential” (p. 11). These include when a child is introduced to a “domain” (playing the piano, for example), the child’s level of social and emotional development, and support and encouragement from parents. A prodigy, Feldman notes, lives “during a certain era, within a particular family, and with a wealth of other, nonprodigious life experiences” (1986, p. 12). Also important is whether the domain is accessible to the child. Prodigies are most often found in domains that “require little prerequisite knowledge” and that “are both meaningful and attractive.” New domains may present themselves as the prodigy gets older (Feldman & Morelock, 2003).

Most relevant for this research is Feldman’s (1986) contention that the achievements of prodigies are tied to how society views the domain in which they occur. An individual might be dissuaded, even punished, for trying to master an unpopular skill or activity. A prodigy’s talent “must be displayed within a culture that appreciates that particular skill at that precise moment in time,” contend Ruthsatz and Detterman (2003, p. 510). Conditions must be “advantageous for sustained engagement,” Feldman claims. If society is not paying attention to the prodigy’s domain, “the likelihood of the child’s special attainments being noticed will be considerably smaller” (Howe 2000, p. 312). The significance of prodigies must be explored against a “broad framework of the evolution of human thought and culture.” Each generation sees many prodigies, Feldman asserts. It is important to ask, “Have they always been an integral part of the variation in human abilities?” and “What kinds of roles have they played in the recognition, development, or advancement of knowledge” (Feldman 1986, p. 14)? Scholars must pin down the “kinds of long-term forces” that provide intellectual ground sufficiently fertile for their emergence. A “remarkable coincidence of biological proclivity and cultural readiness,” a prodigy makes his or her presence felt only “through the arrangement of conditions that identify, engage, and sustain” development (p. xi). Radford (1990) agrees: “The children whose early intellectual feats stand out have enjoyed at least adequate cultural resources, from which they have been able to construct their own rich environment” (p. 3).

At one time, prodigies were seen as “the bearers of divine meaning” (Adams, 2001, p. 5). Society’s overall impression of prodigies has become more sensational. Writing in *Time* magazine, Marshall (2003) asserted prodigies are typically treated as “wondrous curiosities” who are “often taunted by their peers, hounded by the press, prodded by demanding parents, and haunted by outsize expectations of greatness.” Or, as a specialist in the education of gifted children bluntly told the *Time* reporter, “They’re our beautiful freaks.” Moreover, the exhibition of prodigious talent by a child is a shock to the stability and predictability society labors to protect, Feldman argues. The public backs away from these exhibitions as often as it gawks at them; it often denigrates the prodigy’s achievements because it is unwilling to accept the talent that produced them. Prodigies “make us recognize that the world is not as neat and orderly as we would like” (p. 6). This may explain why, in one of the few studies of news media coverage of prodigies, Radford (1998) found that over the course of a decade, journalists for *The Times of London* wrote frequently about prodigies who burned out due to intense pressure to perform – so frequently, he suggested, that it was “not unfair to infer an underlying feeling that this is the norm” in a prodigy’s life. Echoing seminal research (e.g. Gans, 1980; Tuchman, 1980) about how journalists choose what they cover, Radford (1991) asserts that “failures make news, and psychologically perhaps this is of a piece with the public fascination with disasters of all kinds.” His research establishes that journalists imbue coverage of prodigies with the sense that “a very exceptional human being is necessarily somehow abnormal.”

Robert Bogdan (1990) might argue that such treatment of prodigies as “freaks” confirms their social role. His seminal work on the history and social significance of freak shows revealed that the label “freak” was not “a quality that belongs to the person on display.” Instead, “it is something we created: a perspective, a set of practices – a social construction” (p. xi). Rachel Adams (2001), who expanded on Bogdan’s work, agrees: being a “freak” is not “an inherent quality, but an identity realized through gesture, costume, and staging” (p. 6) deployed by the showmen behind the freak shows to “get customers to perform for them” (Bogdan, p. 92). Thus, this research investigates *our* performance. The study dissects how the audience thinks about and experiences prodigies, how their story is told, and how their accomplishments shape our thinking about intelligence, about accomplishment, and about children. Following the lead set by Bogdan in his discussion of how society tells the story of people with disabilities, this work “has less to do with what they are physiologically than who we are culturally” (p. 146). It is possible that society’s perception of prodigies stems from a “social antipathy...toward the gifted,” as Montour (1977) suggests. Some express doubt that a prodigy’s abilities are real – perhaps out of envy or bitterness. “Nobody likes to feel that someone else is flat-

out better,” Feldman (“Too Smart” 2002) asserts. Society may be guilty of “a kind of vestigial pedophilia” (Isacoff 2006, p. D8) when we obsess over, for example, Jacki Evancho’s ability to sing or a very young Tiger Woods’ golf prowess. “We celebrate diversity,” Feldman claims, but “this kind of diversity we just can’t grasp. It’s just different. It’s like being in a different culture.”

## **Research Questions**

This research seeks preliminary answers to the following research questions: Why do we celebrate child prodigies? What do we take away from our interactions with mediated portrayals of child prodigies? What impact do we believe child prodigies have on society? How has it become “common sense” to believe that child prodigies affect society?

As referenced earlier, it is the audience’s experience with this culture that is the study’s focus. The range of reactions from the public toward prodigies and of meanings taken by the public from their experiences is broader than news media coverage would suggest. “There is always the possibility that they can teach us valuable lessons, or even offer useful tips on how to live,” suggested Howe (2001), a respected expert on the experiences of gifted children. Indeed, in 1887, a writer for *The Musical Times* asserted that the prodigy’s experience is of great benefit “when they show the way to the attainment of higher effort” by the rest of society. Their appearance “may point a moral which can be turned to advantage by those engaged in the slow struggle to attain eminence” (“Prodigies” 1887, p. 524). The arc of a prodigy’s development is similar to a typical individual’s when that person’s potential is properly nurtured. Yet dialogue about prodigies is often limited to societal envy and treatment of prodigies as behavioral anomalies. This research seeks to uncover and probe additional dimensions of this relationship.

## **Method**

In the summer of 2012, the authors conducted a pilot study on perceptions of child prodigies. A short survey was developed and posted on [surveymonkey.com](http://surveymonkey.com). The authors then posted requests for participation in the survey on their respective Facebook pages. Email interviews were also conducted, with participants recruited from the authors’ lists of personal contacts. Because the intent of the research was to explore how participants experience prodigies, and not to generalize about attitudes in a larger population, convenience sampling was an appropriate method (Babbie, 2007). Still, the authors recognize that because of similarities in background, contacts might hold views of prodigies similar to their own. Participation via both methods was voluntary and anonymous; those who chose to complete the survey were advised they could end

their participation at any time. The only demographic information sought by the authors in the survey were the participant's age, sex, and zip code or country of residence. In certain cases, follow-up interviews were conducted via email with participants to allow them to explore the meaning of prodigies in more detail (Bird 1992, p. 112).

Participants were first asked to view a [seven-minute news story](#) on prodigies produced by ABC News in 2011 for its nightly program *Nightline*. The ABC News story was selected because it profiled several child prodigies and explored both the positive and negative aspects of their experiences. It was hypothesized that the story would compel more nuanced and thorough responses from participants. After watching the *Nightline* story, participants moved on to the survey and answered these questions:

- Please describe in detail your reactions to the child and his or her achievements.
- Describe in detail the impact you think the child's achievements have on society.
- Do you believe that children who achieve so much at such a young age are important to society? How so?
- What can the child's experience teach us about ourselves? About what it means to achieve?
- Why do you think the news media pay so much attention to children who achieve so much at a young age?
- Do you think society would be less interested in these children if the news media did not cover them as extensively?
- Describe what you believe are the pitfalls of being a child prodigy.
- Explain the factors you believe may cause a child prodigy to struggle later in life.

The authors then conducted a "long, preliminary soak" (Hall, 1975, p. 15) in the responses to pinpoint primary themes, followed by several subsequent readings. Copious notes were taken by the authors during the readings and then used to refine the themes. The authors did not take the responses at face value (Ang, 1985); instead, the authors explored "what is behind the explicitly written," the "presuppositions and accepted attitudes behind" (p. 11) the comments by participants. Also considered was the "cultural context" within which respondents experienced this presentation of the prodigy's experience. "What goes on in the reception situation should be understood with constant reference to the social and cultural networks that situate the individual viewer," argued Jensen (quoted in Bird, 1987, p. 25). This research takes place at a time of growing concern about the zeal with which parents seek enrichment

opportunities for their children and cram their lives full of organized activities (see Schor, 2004; Quart, 2006; Honore, 2008). Endorsing ethnographic research as a tool to explore the “experiential qualities” of consuming texts, Bird argues the media’s role in our lives is but “one element in a complex interconnected mesh that constitutes culture and the individual’s experience of culture” (p. 111). Thus, the authors were primarily interested in understanding how respondents “interpret the flow of events in their lives” (Agar, 1980, p. 194) – in this case, their interaction through the media with child prodigies.

## **Results and Discussion**

All told, 22 email and 20 survey responses were collected for analysis. Responses varied in length from a few words to lengthy sentences. The main themes revealed by the analysis are as follows:

- Prodigies embody *promise* for the future.
- Prodigies are a source of *inspiration* for the rest of us.
- Prodigies encourage us to *find our bliss* – to do what we love.
- Prodigies *entertain* us in their role of celebrity.
- Prodigies, to have lasting impact, must *do more*.
- Prodigies come to resemble a *collection* that we curate.

Each of these themes will now be discussed in turn.

### **Prodigies embody *promise* for the future**

Awe and amazement were the adjectives most frequently used to describe the prodigies depicted in the ABC News clip. One respondent was “completely blown away.” A respondent who answered the survey online was even more enthusiastic: “My reaction was ‘Way to go! Bravo! These children are special.’” Survey participants asserted that society relies on smart and intelligent people to lead our way into the future. “Pure genius,” wrote an online respondent. “[A]ll those kids are destined for greatness.” We all hope to make contributions to society, said an email respondent. “But I think their potential – that sense of hope that comes in imagining what they might be able to accomplish in the future – I think THAT [respondent’s caps] is even more important.” Another email respondent was more blunt and hinted at the “freak show” framing of prodigies by journalists: “They’re cute, they’re aberrant, they’re remarkable, and their existence suggests a hopeful future.” Prodigies are a source of “hope that not everything in the world is bad and not everyone in the world is ordinary,” argued a respondent in her email.

That promise can only be realized through a continuation of a meritocracy, where the talented set an example for society. “It is important to identify those with gifts and nurture them to hone their skills” for our betterment, suggested an email respondent. The talent of prodigies must be given “they limelight they deserve,” emphasized another. Thanks to the news media bringing prodigies to our attention, “they...let the word know that there is no age limit for excellence,” according to one respondent. We must be careful, said a respondent by email, not to confuse the prodigy’s achievements with real social progress. “When a prodigy arises...the craft or art then takes a back seat to the fascination with the mind of the prodigy,” the respondent wrote.

Some respondents expressed hope that educators would use the example set by prodigies as motivation for their students, or as the catalyst for change in how we teach children of all ability levels – this despite some concern that the prodigy’s experience could cause parents to “push their kids more so that they turn out to prodigies.” Still, their experience “could produce a paradigm shift in the ways we educate children and at what level and at what age; in the ways we recognize and/or reward (monetary \$\$\$) accomplishments; in the ways we ‘talk’ and the emphasis we place on the talents in the arts,” one respondent noted. Another hoped educators would “develop more educational programs that identify giftedness,” adding a concern that we have failed to identify and nurture prodigies from lower socioeconomic groups.

And it is possible, noted several respondents, that prodigies, who have shown so much promise at a very young age, may have already exhibited all of their skills and talents. “I found myself hoping that they don’t become disappointed in the future having had so much success as a child,” an email respondent wrote. People tend to follow their leadership knowing that they have some one or something to fall back on. The intelligence they show as children provides a certain expectation from them as they grow into adults. They are expected to perform better and at a higher ranking as and when they grow up. One quote that stood out was “If you reach the top as a child, there is nowhere to go but down as an adult.”

### **Prodigies are a source of *inspiration* for the rest of us**

Many participants expressed awe about the prodigies described in the ABC News story, and believed they were a source of inspiration to society – and more narrowly, to individuals who may not contribute as much to society as they should. Prodigies “open up the eyes of people who don’t do much,” said an email respondent. “They can inspire others to be the best they can be,” wrote another. A few respondents categorized themselves as “normal” or “normals” in need of inspiration from prodigies. “Very few people tell how amazing you are as an adult,” said an email respondent. Also via email, another respondent expressed

the belief that “normal people like us can also achieve this level of excellence.” The prodigies in the clip “made me feel average which isn’t necessarily a bad thing,” a respondent explained in an email. “It also made me want to do more and become great at something.” An online respondent acknowledged the difficulty in predicting whether prodigies would sustain their talents, but wondered if those talents would affect “the ordinary populace.” We are not interested “in the average person doing the average job – they are interested in who is doing what better and more efficiently than they are,” an email respondent concluded.

Prodigies are “gifts to show society what is possible,” said an online respondent. “I think people are more excited when children do something amazing versus when adults do,” a respondent said in an email. “It shows me that anything is possible,” another said via the online survey. “We can achieve anything if we just open our minds to the possibilities.” The existence of these achievements have led to the public emulating their skills and gives society a perspective on their own life – who they are and what they have achieved from their transition from childhood to adulthood. Consequently, many adults are inspired to set higher goals and take the necessary steps to achieve them. Their actions give the society an insight into the way individuals learn, create and deal with challenges – inspiration playing a key role at each stage. Prodigies inspire people to work harder and achieve something greater for themselves. They will then believe in themselves and their talent.

In addition, they possess a newfound attitude towards accomplishing something great. Prodigies create a bar of expectations, not only for themselves but for present and future generations to follow. They are expected to perform at a certain level of excellence. Society viewing such high levels of talent wishes to view the same in their children, possibly giving rise to parental pressure. Prodigies “can have a very negative effect on other parents who want their own child to get the attention and opportunities the prodigies are getting,” explained an email respondent. Respondents expressed much deserved concern on this pressing issue. Not only does inspiration play a positive role, but also has its negative impacts – emulation being top on the list. The participants believe that prodigies can have an adverse impact on other parents who want their children to have the attention and opportunities that the prodigies are getting.

### **Prodigies encourage us to *find our bliss* – to do what we love**

Participants generally felt that child prodigies are gifted with an abundance of talent. Moreover, their achievements at such a young age have led us to believe that passion plays a key role in mastering their particular skill. Most respondents said they believed the prodigies in the ABC News clip liked what they were doing. After viewing the video presented to them, the respondents put forth that it is clear that these children work hard because they want to. They have a



passion for their talent. It is this dedication that is infectious and teaches society to put in more effort to pursue their individual hidden talents. The joy on the children's faces encourages and inspires people to follow their passion and raw skills. "We can look at a prodigy and see the determination and love for the task and adopt that into our own lives," noted an email respondent. These children inspire the public to accelerate their performances and the only way to do so is to find what we truly love to do. "They have a passion for their talent, and that is infectious," explained an email respondent, "and it teaches us that maybe if we work hard to pursue our passion, maybe we can find our hidden talent." Another noted, "I think if we can learn from them to keep the enjoyment alive in what we do, we can benefit."

The lessons one learns from prodigies is the joy and fulfillment that comes from following your passion. "I believe we all have gifts within us – it may take longer to find ours, but with them we can all soar," asserted an online respondent. Society sees the determination and love for a task these children have and helps them adapt these attitudes in their own lives. Prodigies makes society think about what it means to achieve something great, what success looks like and gives us something to strive for. "If you like something, go for it, pursue it," advised an online respondent. "[M]ost importantly, enjoy it to excel in it. Do not stop achieving."

### **Prodigies entertain us in their role of celebrity**

The skills exhibited by the prodigies in the ABC News clip "are mostly for entertainment," an online respondent stated. "They will not change the world as a whole but I guess they could change someone's night, but not their whole life." The rest of us "need a 'wow' factor now and then to break up life a bit," observed an email respondent. Prodigies contribute to "the general cultural entertainment," often through promotion by the media as "a novelty act." Respondents generally treated prodigies as celebrities – even going so far in a few cases as offering advice about how to cope with a dimming "spotlight" as they get older. Like celebrities such as Lindsay Lohan, prodigies may have difficulty adjusting to life after fame because they have lost "important aspects of growing" while displaying their skills and achievements. They may encounter financial trouble, be unable to begin a different career, or turn to drugs as so many celebrities do, several respondents suggested. "Like child actors who grow up and have no roles, these kids could very well turn to nothing, and no one wants to be nothing," asserted an email respondent. With fame comes "the scrutiny of the media, which could lead to problems down the road," predicted an email respondent.

The survey respondents clearly recognized that the media, including journalists, love anomalies – people who fall outside behavioral norms. Society

pays attention to rare and unique ideas: child prodigies accurately fit this definition. The news media hones in on such stories to spark the interest of the public. The participants also put forth that it is very rare for a child to display an ability of such high magnitude at such a young age. Hence, the media exploits this to provide sensational stories. The prodigies' success is considered a "miracle" and anything that is not "normal" is more likely to grab the attentiveness and stoke the interest of the audience. "Kids are cute and make for good ratings," stated an email respondent, echoing assessments made by others. One of the quotes drawn from the answers of the survey was "prodigies are a potent gee whizz factor for producers." The media pays attention to the ratings and broadcasts what most people want to watch – something unusual, unique, different and sensational, or, in the words of an email respondent, "something to end the bad news day with a positive note." The respondents add that society is hungry for talent and the media adequately catches up with this appetite. It has reached the point where prodigies are commercialized because they are outside the realm of the typical. Society wishes to hear and watch 'feel good' stories - something that shows hope and aspiration. This in turn compels the media to provide what, in truth, the public asks for – entertainment.

### **Prodigies, to have lasting impact, must *do more***

Respondents are of the opinion that no matter what these children achieve, it may never be enough. For starters, they should continue learning about the skill they have seemingly mastered so young. "Any child that doesn't on to greater academies to hone their talents is a failure to society," an online respondent harshly noted. "People will always expect more and more as they grow older, and maybe the child will reach a point where they can't deliver that 'more' because they finally hit a point where it's challenging," theorized an online respondent. An online respondent echoed these sentiments: "if the talent never reaches a world class level – they may be in for a disappointment." The expectations of an email respondent were just as high, but more specific: "Unless the child found a cure for cancer, I am not sure the achievements have a huge impact on the rest of society." The significance of prodigies will ebb "unless they can change the world," suggested an email respondent.

Many respondents wondered whether prodigies would be able to or have the inclination to nurture their talents and continue to achieve. "If at age 8 you are far and away the best at something," explained an email respondent, "do you still have the passion and [remain] hungry enough to stay ahead of the pack?" There will always be some one else who can take the skill one notch higher and at the end of the day, it is only the one at the highest level of accomplishment who gets noticed and appreciated for his/her work. In the case of the video clip

provided to respondents, answers reflected another common theme: it is only when these children create new and exceptional pieces of work that they will be considered as an important part of society. “If you are playing piano for the President of the U.S. at such a young age, and your concerts already get incredible attention, where do you go from there?” asked an online respondent. “Everything goes downhill once you have been identified as a genius at 5 years old,” asserted another. “How can anyone top that?”

One example that was mentioned by a handful of the participants was that an imitation of a piece of Mozart is not of much value to society. Only when a piece different than that of Mozart but of equal or higher quality is produced will they then be considered geniuses. One email respondent chose a different composer to express a similar idea: “Millions of people can play Bach, but not everyone can write a new symphony.” Thus, society is never satisfied with anything. We wish to see higher levels of excellence. In short, prodigies to have a lasting impact on society must do more.

### **Prodigies come to resemble a *collection* that we curate**

While elements of our experience with prodigies as reflected in these responses do support the “freak show” narrative offered up by the news media (one email respondent said our interest in prodigies stems from “our fascination with oddities”), our analysis reveals that we may experience prodigies as carefully curated items in a collection housed in a sort of cultural museum. “At such a young age, they are putting on display their talents and society is appreciating it,” an email respondent contended. Interacting with them is similar in some ways to visiting an athletic Hall of Fame. The claim from several respondents that prodigies do not impact society is belied by the regularity with which we look to them for inspiration. We do so by fixing them in time and by viewing them on a metaphorical shelf. “I don’t think society “needs” [respondent’s emphasis] then per se, so much as wants to admire them and likes to have them,” noted an online respondent. “It’s nice to showcase something uplifting rather than tragic,” another suggested.

Respondents also repeatedly mentioned their need – and society’s need – to be able to look up to someone. Moreover, society lauds and admires those in leadership positions and those who excel. Similarly, prodigies are treated as objects, objects that must be kept out of harm’s way. To do this, we place them on a pedestal. We collect prodigies – each one is good at something different, though we keep the range of fields small. We invest our time and emotional energy into making sure that our collection is complete. We protect them as we would any collection. We must curate the collection for the benefit of society as a whole. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) explain that items in a collection “express dynamic processes within people, among people, and between people

and the total environment” (p. 43). These items “embody goals, make skills manifest, and shape the identities of the user.” We would be unable to make sense of “all the feeling, memories, and thoughts that constitute what one is” without them, they write (p. 2). Prodigies enable our respondents to “negotiate a nexus...between expert and lay knowledge” – one of the functions of a museum, as Macdonald (1996) explains.

## **Conclusions**

Our findings reveal somewhat of a paradox in the attempt of respondents to make meaning of their experience with prodigies (Feldman, 1986, p. 6): many of the respondents expressed the belief that prodigies have not had, and unless they continue to hone their skills and avoid the traps of celebrity, will never have an impact on society, so controlled have their lives been to this point. We seem to ask a lot of prodigies – not only do they have to inspire and entertain us; as they get older, the magnitude of their achievements must continue to grow.

On the other hand, respondents also generally treated the prodigies as sources of inspiration or as a reminder of the need to nurture talent. Their reactions support the idea of a meritocracy. Prodigies reintroduce us to the value of pursuing a career out of love rather than for financial gain. We admire their unbridled, unaffected passion for the fields in which they excel so early. They cause us to wish we had the audacity to take a different career path – and hope the prodigy is not pigeonholed by their early achievements and is given the chance to do the same. Perhaps this reflects our uncertain economy; some of the respondents may be in jobs they do not like, but cannot leave them to “find their bliss” because unemployment in the U.S. remains stubbornly high. Respondents worry far more about how prodigies will adjust to life after their achievements have faded from view than they do about parents pushing their children to emulate prodigies.

In any case, there was little of the “vestigial pedophilia” (Isacoff, 2006, p. D8) or of the “freak show” frame often seen in news media coverage of prodigies. Instead, as Howe (2001) suggested, these respondents see prodigies as examples, as role models. Prodigies are sources of motivation. They teach society “valuable lessons” about the value of striving, of achievement. While several respondents said they believed there was air of “mystery” about prodigies, responses were by and large quite pragmatic. Prodigies are not being seen as the “bearers of divine meaning” (Adams, 2001, p. 5) or even as “wondrous curiosities” (Marshall, 2003). Instead, these respondents perceive prodigies as celebrated role models who can inspire the rest of us to achieve more. We keep them around, store them, like items in a collection, and take them out when we need to be motivated.

While this paper investigates only a small snowball sampled portion of “who we are culturally,” as Bogdan asserts, this research for the first time offers rich and valuable clues as to how individuals perceive and make meaning from their mediated experience with prodigies. Future research could be built around real-time or real-life interaction between participant and prodigy. A researcher could ask participants for their reactions to an actual performance by a prodigy. It is the authors’ intent to continue to collect responses to the survey in the hopes of enhancing understanding of these perceptions.

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