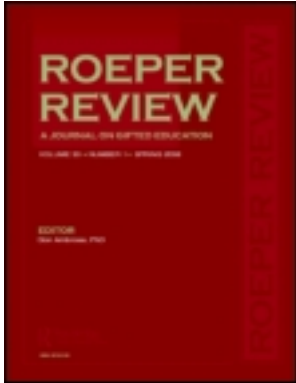


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Publisher: Routledge

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Roeper Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uror20>

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Available online: 06 Jan 2012

To cite this article: Kristin M. Perrone-McGovern, Jenelle N. Boo & Aarika Vannatter (2012): Marital and Life Satisfaction Among Gifted Adults, *Roeper Review*, 34:1, 46-52

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2012.627552>

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ADULT GIFTEDNESS

Marital and Life Satisfaction Among Gifted Adults

Kristin M. Perrone-McGovern, Jenelle N. Boo, and Aarika Vannatter

Spousal giftedness, dual-career status, and gender were studied in relation to marital and life satisfaction among gifted adults. The data for the present study were collected twice over a 5-year period in order to examine the stability of the findings over time. Results indicated that marital satisfaction was significantly related to life satisfaction at both episodes of data collection. However, differences were found between the first and second data collection period regarding spousal giftedness and dual-career status. No gender differences were found in marital or life satisfaction at either data collection period. Further, qualitative data were collected regarding areas of spousal giftedness. The most commonly identified areas were math and science, interpersonal skills, creativity, and general intelligence. Example responses were provided for each of the identified areas.

Keywords: adult giftedness, dual-career marriage, life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, spousal giftedness

Gifted individuals are usually identified during childhood due to early achievement of developmental milestones. However, giftedness involves personality characteristics as well as achievements, and children do not lose their giftedness as they grow into adulthood. Whereas most research on giftedness has focused on children and adolescents, more research is needed to understand how giftedness affects the roles and functioning of gifted individuals after the school years (Tolan, 1994). One area that has not been adequately explored is the marital functioning and life satisfaction of gifted adults.

Dabrowski, in his theory of positive disintegration, proposed that some individuals possess an extraordinary responsiveness to various stimuli, which he termed *overexcitabilities*. He believed that overexcitabilities were associated with giftedness, and he found five types of overexcitability in his research with gifted individuals of

all ages: intellectual, emotional, imaginal, sensual, and psychomotor (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). Research has supported Dabrowski's proposition that gifted individuals are more likely to exhibit overexcitabilities than are non-gifted individuals (Ackerman & Paulus, 1997; Bouchet & Falk, 2001; Tieso, 2007).

Gifted individuals tend to be emotionally sensitive, empathic, and compassionate to others. Other tendencies include difficulty in accepting criticism and feeling isolated or misunderstood (Jacobsen, 1999). These characteristics have the potential to either enhance or detract from marital functioning. Tolan (1994) noted that gifted adults whose social environments do not include other gifted adults may feel alone or dissatisfied, whereas gifted adults who are in frequent contact with other gifted individuals are more likely to feel belongingness and satisfaction. In the present study, we are interested in exploring whether gifted individuals who are married to gifted spouses tend to be more satisfied than gifted individuals who are married to nongifted spouses.

Another factor to consider when examining marital functioning of gifted adults is the career status of the couple (dual or single earner), which can influence marital and life

Accepted 14 October 2010.

Address correspondence to Kristin M. Perrone-McGovern, Department of Counseling Psychology, Teachers College 622, Ball State University Muncie, IN 47306. E-mail: kperrone@bsu.edu

satisfaction. For example, Perrone and Worthington (2001) found that satisfaction with the dual-career lifestyle had a significant, positive impact on marital satisfaction among dual-career couples. In a review of the literature about dual-career couples, Elloy and Smith (2003) identified themes that included stress domains, marital distress, division of labor at home, communication, and strength and resiliency. Specific areas of stress faced by dual-career couples included work overload, lowered social support, strain between work and family, identity confusion, and difficulty reconciling personal and societal ideals of normal. Especially relevant for the current study were the themes that emerged regarding dual-career status and marital distress, which showed that dual-career couples often experience more stress than single-career families. Despite the hardships that couples may experience related to their dual-career status, Elloy and Smith also found themes in the literature that show that these couples also possess strength and resiliency factors, including positive coping mechanisms and satisfying marriages.

Bird and Schnurman-Crook (2005) used a qualitative design to explore dynamics in dual-career couples that related to work and family stress. Their findings indicated that men and women in dual-career couples engaged in both problem-focused coping (e.g., task division, delegation) and emotion-focused coping (e.g., accepting the limitations of others, cognitive restructuring) to deal with work-related stress. Results of this study showed that, though men and women were overwhelmingly successful at developing independent professional identities, they were also very aware of the benefits of a successful career for themselves and family (e.g., finances, modeling, self-respect). Interestingly, the researchers also uncovered that some benefits of the career were related more to gender than others (e.g., men mentioned financial benefits of their careers much more often than women).

Regarding the role of gender in marital and life satisfaction, Crossfield, Kinman, and Jones (2005) found gender differences in work–family spillover for women and men in dual-career couples. Women’s work stress had a greater impact on their male counterparts than vice versa. Though couples endorsed frequent conversations about their work and careers (especially regarding the negative issues at work), these conversations were not found to have a significant impact on the psychological distress or well-being of the partners. Conclusions of the study were that, especially from women to men, spillover effects can happen from one partner’s career to the other partner. This illustrates a way in which dual-career couples could have vicarious stress from one another’s jobs, which could have a deleterious impact on their overall marital or life satisfaction. Further, Martins, Eddleston, and Viegas (2002) reported evidence that women were more distressed by work–family conflict than men, which suggests that women may be more likely to experience decreases in marital and life satisfaction in the face of conflict or distress between dual roles.

Marital satisfaction is an important area of study because research has shown that marital satisfaction can be crucial to overall life satisfaction and well-being (Hawkins & Booth, 2005). The marital relationship is, for many adults, a primary source of social support (Beach, Fincham, Katz, & Bradbury, 1996) that acts as a buffer against mental illness and the deleterious impact of negative life events (Cohen & Wills, 1985). For example, Hawkins and Booth found that unhappily married people scored significantly higher on measures of distress and lower on measures of life satisfaction than happily married individuals.

Thus, we have established that little is known about giftedness in adulthood and particularly about marital and life satisfaction of gifted adults. It is known that gifted individuals have unique personality characteristics that may influence the way they relate to others (e.g., Dabrowski’s overexcitabilities) and that gifted individuals are more likely to feel belongingness and satisfaction when in relationships with other gifted individuals. This led to the question of whether gifted adults with gifted spouses have more satisfaction than gifted adults whose spouses are nongifted. Further, in marriages with two gifted spouses, it is likely that both spouses may have careers because of high career aspirations for many gifted individuals. Gender differences have been found in work–family spillover, which has been linked to marital satisfaction. The importance of marital satisfaction has been demonstrated in the link between marital satisfaction and overall life satisfaction and well-being.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine marital characteristics and life satisfaction among gifted adults. Participants in a longitudinal study of gifted adults were surveyed regarding giftedness in their spouses as well as marital and life satisfaction. In order to separate the effects of having a gifted spouse with having a spouse who had a career, we also assessed the effect of having a dual-career marriage on marital and life satisfaction. Additionally, we examined whether gender influenced marital or life satisfaction. Rather than examining these relationships cross-sectionally, we compared data across a 5-year span with two data collection periods.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 87 gifted adults (33 male, 54 female) who have participated in an ongoing longitudinal study of academically talented students since their high-school graduation in 1988. Data were collected in 2002 and 2007. In order to be included in the analyses for this study, participants had to be married at both data collection times. Participants who were married at only one collection time or were not married at either time were excluded from the study. Ninety-five participants completed surveys in 2002 (35 male and 60 female), and 89 participants completed surveys in

2007 (34 male, 55 female). Two participants were excluded because they were not married at the time of the 2007 data collection (1 male and 1 female), and an additional 6 participants were excluded because they did not complete surveys in 2007. At the time of the 2002 data collection, participants' ages ranged from 31 to 33 years and in 2007 participants' ages ranged from 36 to 38 years. In 2002, 87% of participants were employed outside the home, with the remainder as follows: 5% full-time homemakers, 7% full-time students, and 1% looking for work. In 2007, 85% of participants were employed outside the home, 11% were full-time homemakers, 1% were full-time students, 1% were looking for work, and 2% did not provide information regarding employment status. In 2002, 39% of participants had no children, 25% had one child, 24% had 2 children, 10% had three children, and 2% had four children. In 2007, 22% of respondents had no children, 12% had one child, 43% had 2 children, 21% had 3 children, 1% had 4 children, and 1% had 5 children. Participants were asked whether they had been married previously and no participants indicated having been married more than once.

In terms of educational level, in 2002, the highest educational level attained by 44% of participants was a bachelor's degree, 33% had earned a master's degree, and 23% had earned a doctoral degree. By the 2007 data collection period, 33% of participants had completed a bachelor's degree, 5% had completed some graduate school, 37% had completed a master's degree, and 25% had completed a doctoral degree. Data regarding spouse's educational level were not collected in 2002, but in 2007 for spouse's educational level, 7% of spouses had no college, 18% had some college, 31% had bachelor's degrees, 8% had some graduate school, 25% had master's degrees, and 11% had doctoral degrees.

Procedures

Participants were initially recruited by asking all school counselors at private and public high schools in a Midwestern state to identify the top two graduates in schools graduating less than 250 students and the top five graduates in schools graduating more than 250 students. In addition, National Merit scholars and the two students in each school with the highest ACT scores were asked to participate. The initial sample consisted of 1,724 students (among those meeting the criteria for participation, there was a response rate of 92% for public-school seniors and 78% for private-school seniors). The percentage of female and male participants was around 60% female and 40% male, which has remained relatively consistent across the years of data collection. Beginning in 1989, participants were surveyed annually via mailed surveys. Attrition was very high in the first 3 years of the study due to a large number of students changing addresses: roughly 500 participants dropped out in the first year; an additional 400 participants were lost in the second year; and in the third year approximately 400 more

participants were lost. During the first 3 years, many surveys were returned marked "cannot forward," leading us to believe that some participants who did not continue in the study simply never received the follow-up surveys. The attrition rate in subsequent years was significantly lower, with an average of 30 participants lost each year. Again, the majority of those lost were due to address changes. One reason for the lower attrition rate after the first 3 years was that participants seemed to settle down in one location for longer than a year after that time. Further, the researchers added the question, "Please list the address where you can be reached next year at this time if you anticipate that it will be different from your current address." Some participants provided their parents' addresses, which was more stable than their own. Beginning in 2006, we began to collect participants' e-mail addresses and to offer the option of completing surveys online in order to have an additional way to contact participants if their postal addresses were to change. As mentioned in the Participants section, the present study utilizes data from the 2002 and 2007 follow-up studies. For the 2002 data collection, participants were mailed surveys and asked to return them in stamped, self-addressed envelopes. For the 2007 data collection, data were collected via two different methods. Individuals who had provided their e-mail addresses in the previous year's survey were asked to complete surveys online. Specifically, participants were electronically mailed an introductory letter with a hyperlink to an electronic version of the survey. In the introductory letter, participants were given a choice to complete the survey online or to have a paper copy mailed to them. If participants indicated a preference for mailed surveys they were mailed paper surveys and asked to return them in the stamped, addressed envelopes provided. Additionally, for those participants who had not provided their e-mail addresses in the previous year's survey, we mailed surveys via the postal service. We sent 71 e-mails and received 60 electronically completed surveys (85% response rate). Additionally, we mailed 35 surveys via the postal service and received 27 paper copies (77% response rate). After the 87 surveys were collected in 2007, the research team went through the 2002 data to find data for each participant who had participated in both the 2002 and 2007 data collection periods.

Instruments

Both the 2002 and 2007 surveys included the Marital Satisfaction and Life Satisfaction scales described below. In addition, the 2007 survey included a scale measuring satisfaction with the dual-career lifestyle and open-ended questions regarding giftedness in participants' spouses.

Marital Satisfaction

Marital satisfaction was assessed using the 10-item Marital Satisfaction subscale of the ENRICH scale (Olson

et al., 1989). Two-week test–retest reliability for the Marital Satisfaction subscale was .86 and the internal consistency was estimated at .81 (Olson et al., 1989). Concurrent validity of the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale was established by comparing this scale with the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale. Findings indicated correlations of .73 for individual scores.

Life Satisfaction

The 5-item Likert-type Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffen, 1985) was administered to measure global life satisfaction. Two-month test–retest reliability for the SWLS was .87. Concurrent validity was demonstrated through moderate correlations of the SWLS with 11 other measures of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1985). Content validity was shown through correlations of the SWLS with interviewer estimates of life satisfaction. Discriminant validity was shown through a low correlation between the SWLS and the Marlow Crowne Social Desirability Scale.

Satisfaction With the Dual-Career Lifestyle

The Satisfaction With the Dual-Career Lifestyle Scale (Perrone & Worthington, 2001) was designed to measure satisfaction with the lifestyle of having a career and having a spouse with a career. Like the SWLS, it is a 5-item Likert-type scale. The internal consistency estimate for the 5-item Dual-Career Satisfaction Scale was .87. Internal consistency estimates (item to total correlations) for the five dual-career items were .74, .83, .89, .80, and .81.

Spousal Giftedness

Participants responded to two open-ended questions:

1. Was your spouse identified as gifted when he or she was a child and/or do you notice any signs of giftedness in your spouse?
2. If you perceive your spouse as gifted, in what areas is your spouse gifted?

Demographic Information

Participants were asked about their gender, educational status, vocational status, marital status, parental status, and spouse's vocational and educational status.

RESULTS

Intercorrelations were examined between marital and life satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was found to be significantly correlated with life satisfaction in both 2002 ($r = .48, p < .05$) and 2007 ($r = .54, p < .05$). Further, satisfaction with the dual-career lifestyle was measured in 2007.

Examination of intercorrelations revealed that satisfaction with the dual-career lifestyle was significantly correlated with both marital satisfaction ($r = .49, p < .05$) and life satisfaction ($r = .42, p < .05$). One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to examine whether participants who reported giftedness in their spouses would differ significantly from participants who did not report giftedness in their spouses on the dependent variables of marital satisfaction and life satisfaction. Results for the 2002 data revealed significant differences for marital satisfaction ($f = 4.40, p < .05$) and life satisfaction ($f = 4.81, p < .05$); participants with gifted spouses had higher marital and life satisfaction than participants who did not identify their spouses as gifted. Results for the 2007 data revealed no significant differences in either marital or life satisfaction for gifted versus nongifted spouses.

Next, ANOVAs were conducted to examine whether having a dual-earner marriage (both participant and spouse employed) influenced marital or life satisfaction. Results for the 2002 data revealed significant differences for marital satisfaction ($f = 3.87, p < .05$) and for life satisfaction ($f = 3.58, p < .05$); participants in dual earner marriages were more satisfied with their marriages and their lives. Conversely, results for the 2007 data revealed no significant differences in either marital or life satisfaction for dual-earner versus single-earner couples. ANOVAs conducted with gender as the independent variable revealed no significant differences in marital or life satisfaction based on gender with either the 2002 or the 2007 data.

The majority of participants reported that their spouses were gifted (66%), whereas 32% stated that their spouses were not gifted and 2% were unsure. The gender distribution was fairly even, with a slightly higher percentage of female participants reporting giftedness in their spouses than male participants (67% of female participants indicated that their husbands were gifted and 62% of male participants indicated that their wives were gifted). Participants who identified giftedness in their spouses were asked about areas of giftedness. These areas were analyzed using a qualitative phenomenological approach in which we sought to understand the perceptions of individuals with a shared experience of being identified as gifted in high school. We used the strategy of analyzing participants' specific statements and looking for themes (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007). The researchers independently generated themes and assigned responses to categories before meeting to determine consensus in order to increase the trustworthiness of the data.

Using these methods, areas of spousal giftedness were classified into the following categories: math and science; exceptional memory; mechanical or spatial ability; interpersonal skills; language and writing; problem solving and critical thinking; athletic ability; leadership, business, or organizational skills; creative or artistic abilities; and general academic abilities. The percentage of responses that were categorized into each of the themes is reported in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Participants' Perceptions of Areas of Giftedness for
Their Spouses

<i>Area</i>	<i>% of responses</i>
Math and science	18
Interpersonal skills	18
Creative or artistic abilities	16
General academic abilities or intelligence	16
Problem solving and critical thinking	9
Language and writing	8
Leadership, business, or organizational skills	6
Exceptional memory	3
Mechanical or spatial ability	3
Athletic ability	3

Math and science and interpersonal skills were the most frequently cited areas of spousal giftedness, followed by creative or artistic abilities and general academic abilities or intelligence. Example responses from the four most common themes are:

- Math and science theme
 “My husband is gifted in math and science for sure, and is also very knowledgeable over a wide range of topics.”
 “Mathematics is a very, very strong area for my spouse.”
- Interpersonal skills:
 “He is especially good at dealing with people who might be considered difficult. He has a good working relationship with colleagues and bosses. He is excellent at empathizing with others and I think this has helped him succeed in his career. People are happy to cooperate with him, even if they usually don’t cooperate with others.”
 “My spouse is very gifted in emotional intelligence. She understands human nature and why people do the things they do.”
- Creative or artistic ability:
 “My wife is gifted musically and plays a number of instruments.”
 “My husband excels in drama and music.”
 “My wife is very talented with her singing abilities.”
- General academic abilities or intelligence:
 “He was valedictorian of his graduating class, an honors scholar at our university, and graduated Summa Cum Laude.”
 “My husband is very intelligent . . . he and I are often on the same wavelength and can grasp the others’ point or meaning quickly.”

DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined marital characteristics of gifted adults, specifically incorporating spousal characteristics (spousal giftedness vs. spousal nongiftedness), marital characteristics (dual career vs. single career), and gender. Marital satisfaction was significantly related to life satisfaction at both episodes of data collection, which is consistent with previous research (e.g., Hawkins & Booth, 2005). At the time of the first data collection in 2002, significant differences were found in marital and life satisfaction between participants in dual-career relationships; in other words, those individuals in dual-career marriages had higher levels of both life and marital satisfaction than those individuals in single-earner marriages. Interestingly, this difference was not found at the time of the second data collection in 2007. However, in 2007, satisfaction with the dual-career lifestyle was found to be significantly correlated with both marital and life satisfaction. These results are congruent with the findings of Perrone and Worthington (2001), who also found evidence of a relationship between satisfaction with the dual-career lifestyle and marital satisfaction. No gender differences in marital or life satisfaction were found at either the first or second data collection. Given the research by Martins et al. (2002) that identified women as more likely to experience decreases in marital and life satisfaction than men in the face of conflict or distress between dual roles, this result is surprising.

One interesting finding of the present study is that in 2002, participants with gifted spouses reported higher levels of marital and life satisfaction than those without gifted spouses, whereas no difference was found in 2007. One possible explanation for this finding is that gifted individuals become less reliant on spouses for the emotional benefits that are experienced by gifted adults who surround themselves with gifted others. For example, those who are students or just starting a career may look toward a spouse as the primary source of social support and therefore may be more satisfied if that spouse is also gifted. However, once an individual reaches later life stages, it appears that spousal giftedness becomes less important. Several factors may be at play here. For example, the gifted individual may increasingly look to coworkers or peers for support as they move from the exploration into the establishment stage of their career (Super, 1990). Perhaps once individuals feel comfortable in their occupations and also in their marriages, the benefits of giftedness may be less important to marital quality than factors such as shared interests in leisure pursuits or family life overall.

In further support of the interpretations offered above, the present study found that 34% of participants did not see signs of giftedness in their spouses (including the 2% who were unsure). This finding, combined with the findings above of no difference in 2007 for levels of marital and life satisfaction, suggests that at this stage in life spousal giftedness is

not a major factor in satisfaction. However, it is interesting to note that 66% of participants did identify signs of giftedness in their spouses. Two major explanations for this finding arise. First, it is possible that gifted individuals tend to seek other gifted individuals as spouses. This makes sense given that couples are likely to meet while engaging in academic, vocational, or leisure activities, all of which might be influenced by one's giftedness (i.e., a gifted individual is likely to meet another gifted individual with similar interests in graduate school). Second, it is possible that at least some of the participants see certain aptitudes of their spouses as being higher than what really exist. However, given that the present study is concerned with satisfaction, it is irrelevant whether the spouse is actually gifted or simply perceived as being gifted by the participant. What matters is what effects this perception (or reality) has on the participant's satisfaction levels.

Of those 66% who identified their spouses as being gifted, a wide range of signs of giftedness were found. These signs coincide with Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, which include eight areas: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Gardner described giftedness as domain specific, which again coincides with the findings of the present study. In addition, it is important to note that most, although not all, of these signs are most beneficial in academic or vocational roles. Few have much to do with the characteristics of a romantic relationship, although interpersonal skills, language skills, and problem-solving skills may be especially relevant. This could help explain the findings that spousal giftedness had no effect on marital and life satisfaction in 2007. Of all of the signs identified, math/science and interpersonal skills each made up 18% of the responses. Creative/artistic abilities and general academic abilities or intelligence each made up 16% of the responses. These four categories totaled 68% of the responses. They were clearly the most frequently noted signs of giftedness among participants. It is possible that these are the signs that are most often labeled by others as signs of giftedness. Because participants were asked to provide signs rather than select from a list provided by the researchers, it is possible that spouses exhibited other signs but the participants did not think of these signs as indications of giftedness.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of the present study was the relatively small sample size. Only 87 individuals were identified who participated in both the 2002 and 2007 data collection. Due to the longitudinal nature of the study, no additional participants could be recruited outside of the original subject pool. The rate of attrition over the 5-year period was not high (from 95 participants in 2002 to 89 participants in 2007 and 87 participants who met the criteria of being married at both

data collection periods). However, the attrition rate over the 19 years of the overall longitudinal study was significantly higher, with the original sample size of over 1,700 participants dwindling to less than 500 participants in the first 3 years of the study and a loss of approximately 25–30 participants per year after that time. Thus, we cannot be certain whether there are characteristics that may distinguish those participants who chose to continue their participation from those who did not. Another limitation of the study is in the method of data collection, which was survey only. This could lead to a mono-method bias; therefore, a greater depth of response may have been gained using an interview method. A final limitation of the current study lies in the identification of spousal giftedness, which was done via verbal report of the spouse based on either their knowledge of formal identification or on his or her perception of gifted indicators in the spouse. The results may have been enhanced had we utilized a more structured assessment of spousal giftedness.

Directions for Future Research

In order to address the limitations, future research might take into account measured levels of giftedness in couples, rather than perceived giftedness. In addition, the present study examined married couples, but future research might broaden the definition of a couple in order to include those who are committed but not married. For example, same-sex couples may not live in a state where they can legally marry and therefore might not be represented in a study that only includes married couples. Future researchers could employ multiple methods of data collection, such as interviews, school records, or utilizing surveys of employers/coworkers or others who may be able to identify signs of giftedness in the individuals.

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AUTHOR BIOS



Kristin M. Perrone-McGovern, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Counseling Psychology and Guidance Services at Ball State University and a licensed psychologist. She directs the master’s programs in Clinical Mental Health Counseling at Ball State University. Her research interests include gifted adults, attachment, gender roles, and work–family interface. E-mail: kperrone@bsu.edu

Jenelle N. Boo, PhD, is a staff clinician and coordinator of sexual assault response services at the Counseling & Student Development Center at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. She earned her master’s degree in counseling and her doctoral degree in counseling psychology from the Department of Counseling Psychology & Guidance Services at Ball State University. Her other research and clinical interests include adult attachment, sexual assault, interpersonal trauma, and working with spirituality in counseling. E-mail: jenelle.boo@gmail.com



Aarika Vannatter, MA, is a doctoral student in the Department of Counseling Psychology at Ball State University. She earned her master’s degree from Ball State and her undergraduate degree from Purdue University. In addition to research with gifted adults, other areas of interest include career development, suicide prevention, grief, trauma response, mood disorders, and working with older adults. E-mail: aarikavannatter@gmail.com