A Longitudinal Study of Post-High-School Development in Gifted Individuals at Risk for Poor Educational Outcomes

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Fourteen gifted late adolescents, considered at risk for poor educational outcomes because of underachievement, depression, or family situation, participated in a 4-year qualitative longitudinal study focusing on 4 developmental tasks: gaining autonomy, becoming differentiated, establishing career direction, and developing a mature relationship. The process of resolving conflict with parents generated the largest portion of narrative data. The majority of participants still lacked direction and a mature relationship at the end of the study, but most respondents had resolved conflict, felt autonomous, and reported good emotional health. Multiple task accomplishments were associated with being able to concentrate on academics.

Moving from adolescence to adulthood involves detaching from parents, finding career direction, achieving autonomy, and developing a mature relationship, among several processes described by developmental theorists (e.g., Chickering, 1969; Erikson, 1968; Havighurst, 1972; Levinson, 1986, 1996). Exceptional ability does not exempt individuals from struggles associated with accomplishing these tasks. In fact, heightened sensitivity, which has been associated with high ability (Dabrowski, 1964; Lovecky, 1992; Tucker & Hafenstein, 1997), may make "uncontrollable" developmental transitions uniquely challenging for the highly able (Rakow, 1989). Difficult developmental transitions may in turn place such individuals at risk for poor post-high-school academic performance.

This 4-year longitudinal study explored developmental processes in gifted individuals who were at risk for poor educational outcomes. Their difficulties were generally not obvious. Their behavior was not disruptive, their demeanor was pleasant, and their anxieties were usually not shared with school personnel. Their risk factors—underachievement, depression, a high level of family conflict, or an otherwise difficult family situation—are not typically cited in the literature concerning risk for adolescent school dropout (which typically cites absenteeism, school behavior problems, delinquency, and pregnancy), although the criteria used here may be associated with those. In some cases, these individuals were not only at risk for not reaching their educational potential, but some were also at risk for not surviving young adulthood.

The focus of this study was the subjective experience of their post-high-school development, an area that has rarely been addressed in gifted-education, at-risk, or family-development literature. Other literature has, however, given attention to differentiation, indecision, identity exploration, and conflict with parents, areas that are related to the four developmental tasks of interest here.

Differentiation

Differentiation is a process related to maturation and self-definition, to gaining objectivity about self and environment and clarity about personal values and goals, and to "taking
maximum responsibility for one's own emotional being and
destiny rather than blaming others or the context" (Friedman,
1991, p. 141). For Bowen (1978), differentiation was not the
same as separation/individuation, the latter being a goal to be
achieved, rather than a process.

Identity. Identity is a complex notion, essentially answering
the question "Who am I?" Identity development involves ques-
tioning in fundamental areas such as future occupation, sexuali-
ty, and religious and political ideas and eventually developing
feelings of rootedness, confidence, and sense of purpose. The
end of adolescence does not necessarily mean the end of iden-
tity development (Blasi & Glodis, 1995). Regarding the self-
definition component of differentiation mentioned above, the
period of active exploration of identity, or "identity crisis," is
likely to be pronounced in persons with high ability (Erikson,
1968). Superior cognitive complexity and integration have also
been connected to both having and being able to resolve iden-
tity deficit, the latter through making commitments (Slugowski, Marcia, & Koopman, 1984). Marcia's (1980) four
types of identity status—no crisis and no commitment, crisis
with no commitment, commitment without crisis, and com-
mitment after crisis—offer a framework for understanding late-adolescent and young-adult processes, particularly regard-
ing finding direction.

Commitment to career and relationship. The process of com-
mitting to a career is of particular interest here, commitment
being seen as investment in a particular occupation or ideology
(Marcia, 1980). Baumeister, Shapiro, and Tice (1985) pro-
posed that there is an underlying emotional conflict between
the desire for commitment and the reluctance to give up one's
possibilities. In that connection, multipotentiality in gifted
individuals has been connected to greater career indecisiveness
(e.g., Kerr, 1991; Rysiew, Shore, & Leeb, 1999).

Problems with career indecision (Holland & Holland,
1977), as well as with developing a mature relationship, may
reflect a lack of differentiation. According to Zingaro (1983),
indecisiveness involves difficulty distinguishing one's own goals
from those of others, an aspect of differentiation. Finding career
direction and establishing intimacy in a relationship are tasks
directly related to differentiation of self, with differentiation and
commitment potentially contributing to, and being affected
by, one another. Blustein, Walbridge, and Friedlander (1991)
found in one study that separation difficulties were not related
to career indecision, but both separation from and attachment
to parents were related to commitment in a second study.

Academic Achievement

A lack of career direction has been related to a lack of
motivation for academic achievement (Eigen, Hartman, &
Hartman, 1987), and, conversely, aspiration has been con-
ected to achievement (Farmer, 1985). Regarding the rela-
tionship between affective aspects of post-high-school
education and academic performance, Holmbeck and
Wandrej (1993) found that separation-individuation was
among the variables that predicted college adjustment better
than cognitive indicators. In terms of adjustment and deci-
sion making, Valine (1976) found that dropping out of col-
lege may reflect assertiveness and choice, important to
consider here in regard to accomplishing developmental
tasks.

Sequence and Convergence
of Task Accomplishments

Sequence and convergence of task accomplishments have
not received much scholarly attention, although scholars have
noted that vocational and ideological identities are formulated
gradually, with exploration of occupational alternatives usually
occurring after physical and sexual components of the self
and before political and religious ideologies are formulated
(Dellas & Jernigan, 1990). In addition, the connection
between, and sequence of, identity formation and develop-
ment of intimacy in relationships have been explored. Males
and females with masculine gender-role orientations and traits
tend to follow the identity-then-intimacy pattern, while
women with feminine gender-role orientations tend to move
toward identity and intimacy simultaneously (Dyk & Adams,
1990).

Family Factors

The study here included an initial assessment of several
aspects of family functioning because related literature has sug-
gested that family factors are related to both developmental
problems and difficulties with academic motivation and per-
formance. Though Eigen et al. (1987) did not find a relation-
ship between family cohesion and adaptability and delayed
decision making, their study suggested that family systems that
are either too rigid or too loose may interfere with career deci-
sions. Too few rules and low levels of attachment may lead to
premature separation and insufficient guidance and interfere
with decision making. In contrast, strict rules and high attach-
ment may prevent individuation.

Specifically in terms of academic performance, Wood,
Chapin, and Hannah (1988) found that family cohesiveness
distinguished achievers from underachievers. Hall, Jugovic, and
Lee (2000) found a positive correlation between family cohe-
sion and higher academic achievement for females.
Autonomy-Striving and Conflict With Parents

Conflict with parents was of interest in this study, based on several pertinent perspectives in the literature. Distancing and heightened family conflict during adolescence have been seen as developmentally healthy and not necessarily indicative of a decline in the parent-adolescent relationship (Steinberg, 1988). Conflict and related processes reflect the significance of relationships in development (Collins, 1996), and conflict is seen as a manifestation of autonomy-striving that is a necessary component of the process of separating from one's parents (Blos, 1979) and developing functional autonomy (Collins, Laursen, Mortensen, Luebker, & Ferreira, 1997). Kidwell, Dunham, Bacho, Pastorino, and Portes (1995) found that adolescents who were actively engaged in identity exploration were likely, more so than those who were not, to be in conflict with parents and other authority figures. However, conflict with parents, with a high level of reactivity, might suggest a low level of differentiation, the conflict binding young adults and parents in a “too-tight connection” (Hoffman, 1975, p. 459) even at great geographical distance. On the other hand, though young adults who move away from home may be ambivalent about autonomy and dependency needs (Gortesfeld & Mirsky, 1991), family functioning may improve as a result of distance (Sullivan & Sullivan, 1980).

The Subjective Experience of Development

Almost nothing is known about how a person changes when increasing decisiveness (Sepich, 1987). Rice (1992) emphasized that longitudinal data are necessary to examine developmental changes within individuals, particularly regarding whether and how independence from parents increases in young adults over time. Gonzales and Hayes (1988) emphasized the variability of underachievers in terms of achievement of developmental milestones and the need to view their development holistically.

A few scholars have used qualitative longitudinal methodology for developmental studies, exploring the subjective experience of development in general (Baumeister et al., 1985) and also giving attention to specific developmental tasks (Blasi & Glodis, 1995) and life events (Merriam & Clark, 1993). With these perspectives in mind, this study explored the phenomenological experience of development in persons with exceptional ability, including some who attended college after high school and some who did not. Four in-depth developmental case studies from this study have been presented elsewhere (Peterson, 2001).

Purpose of the Study

The study was designed to generate a variety of data for multiple purposes. The first purpose was to study qualitative post-high-school changes in developmental processes, especially detaching from parents, establishing career direction, gaining autonomy, and developing a mature relationship. The second purpose was to explore the relationships among these various tasks in terms of sequence and convergence of accomplishments. The third was to discover whether success with individual or multiple tasks was associated with perceived ability to concentrate and focus on academic work. Last, this exploratory study sought to identify areas worthy of further study, particularly as related to development and the lack of educational achievement for gifted young adults.

Methods

Participants

Thirty gifted students, identified as being at risk in the course of their participation in discussion groups focusing on affective concerns, were contacted or within a year of high school graduation and asked to participate in a research study. An additional student, who had dropped out of school and had married, was also contacted. They were told that participants in the research study would be asked periodically to fill out a questionnaire concerning their development and would be invited to elaborate on their answers in writing. Fourteen students agreed to participate. The narrow age range was not a concern because the focus of the study was the experience of development, sequence and convergence (not age) of developmental task-accomplishments, and convergence as associated with perceived ability to concentrate on academic work.

Participants (to be referred to by pseudonyms) were 14 intellectually gifted students (6 females, 8 males) who had attended a midwestern high school of approximately 1,500 students. All were Caucasian and middle-class. They were considered to be at risk for poor educational outcomes on the basis of underachievement, depression, family conflict, or family situation that might interfere with further academic work. Based on final high school grade-point average (GPA), 1 was categorized as a high achiever (GPA > 3.75), 1 was a moderate achiever (GPA 3.35–3.74), 4 were moderate underachievers (GPA 2.75–3.34), and 8 were extreme underachievers (GPA < 2.75), according to categories used in previous studies (Peterson, 2000; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996). Underachievers were in the lower 75% in class rank, with extreme underachievers in the lower 50%. Given that all participants had met at least one of several stringent school-district criteria for iden-
tification for gifted education (scoring in the top 2–3%, according to national norms, on an individually administered or group-administered ability test; having a composite score in the top 5% on a standardized achievement test; or scoring at or above the 98th percentile on at least one subtest in a standardized achievement test battery), the above designations regarding achievement and underachievement were deemed appropriate. The participants’ test scores attested to their intellectual giftedness.

Instruments

Initially, in order to provide baseline descriptive information, all participants completed three assessments associated with the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems (Olson, 1990), which integrates system theory, family research, and family therapy and incorporates the dimensions of family cohesion and adaptability. Cohesion and adaptability are related in a curvilinear way to family functioning in that too much or too little is seen as problematic, while “balance” between independence and connection and between structure and flexibility is conducive to optimal family functioning (Walsh & Olson, 1989). The assessments used here were FACES III: Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (Olson, Porter, & Lavee, 1982), Family Satisfaction Scale (Olson, 1990), and A Stress Scale for Couples and Families (Olson, 1990).

The Faces III (Olson, et al., 1998) scale requests a numerical self-assessment on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = almost never; 5 = almost always), for 20 items (e.g., “We shift household responsibilities from person to person”; “Rules change in our family”; “Family members ask each other for help”; “We can easily think of things to do together as a family”). An extreme total score fitting the cohesion category of “Disengaged” reflects, among several characteristics, extreme emotional separateness, very low interaction, low parent-child closeness, individual/oppositional decision making, and outside-of-family focus. At the other extreme, “Enmeshed” indicates, among several aspects, little private space and personal separateness, extreme emotional reactivity, and demands for loyalty. An extreme total score fitting the adaptability category of “Rigid” suggests autocratic control, strictly defined roles, unchanging routines and rules, and strictly enforced rules. At the other extreme of adaptability is the category “Chaotic,” which refers to erratic or limited leadership, laissez-faire discipline, unclear roles, impulsive decisions, and inconsistently enforced rules.

The Family Satisfaction Scale (Olson, 1990) contains 10 items (e.g., “Your family’s ability to cope with stress”; “Your family’s concern for each other”; “The amount of arguing that occurs between family members”) to be assessed on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = very dissatisfied; 5 = very satisfied). A total score in the “high” category reflects comfort with the way one’s family gets along and works together. “Low” suggests unhappiness with relationships within the family.

The Family Stress Scale (Olson, 1990) contains 20 items to be identified as “true” or “false” that reflect stressful family experiences in the past year in the areas, such as career, finances, serious illness, death, increased conflict, or increased difficulty in managing children. A total score designated as “high” reflects a high stress level due to personal conflicts and family changes, and “low” indicates calm family relationships and few stressful changes.

In addition, a nonstandardized questionnaire was sent to participants seven times during the study. This instrument had a largely developmental focus and consisted of 18 items, each requesting a numerical self-assessment from 0 to 10 (0 = none at all; 10 = very high or to a great extent). Four items were related to conflict with parents and siblings and distress over extended-family matters (e.g., “Level of conflict with parents at the present time”; “Feeling of distress over matters involving extended family”). Two concerned response to authority (e.g., “How able are you to accept authority in someone in a position of authority?”). Two referred to the maturity and stability of the last relationship (e.g., “How successful/mature was the last love relationship you were involved in?”). Four asked about career, avocational, and academic focus (e.g., “How focused do you feel at this point regarding career goal?”). Four assessed autonomy (e.g., “How much are you responsible for your laundry, food, finances, taxes, purchases?”). One each asked about physical and emotional health (e.g., “What is the present state of your physical health?”). Participants were also invited to respond to 13 related open-ended questions (e.g., “If your level of conflict is 5 or more, what kinds of issues are contributing to conflict?” “What experiences have had an impact on your self-esteem in the past year?” “Comment on your rating for question 17.”)

For the first 2 years, the participants were contacted every 6 months. During the final 2 years, because the response to each mailing had routinely been spread over several months, participants were contacted only annually. Response rate varied from 63% to 100% for the seven mailings.

This study was a “bounded study” (Creswell, 1998) framed by the 4-year time span and situated in a transitional stage of development. With basic tenets of phenomenological data analysis as a guide (Crotty, 1998), qualitative analysis was done on written elaboration to open-ended questions and on letters, which sometimes accompanied the returned questionnaires. The researcher attempted to bracket out preconceptions (Moustakas, 1994), such as those suggested in the review of literature, and searched for “all possible meanings” (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). Analysis was first conducted on the responses of one participant at a time (Moustakas, 1994), then on all.
responses to one developmental (gaining autonomy, detaching from parents, establishing career direction, and developing a mature relationship) or other category at a time, and then across all questions for all participants. Using a system reflecting the constant-comparative methodology of Glaser and Strauss (1967), the language in the responses and letters was analyzed thematically, without predetermined categories, and with themes emerging from the data. As various themes emerged, a color-coding scheme for identifying them was developed, with similarly coded language units then compared and grouped together. Individual units and clusters of units were continually reassessed for fit with the emerging coding scheme, which itself remained open to modification. Ultimately, clusters of meanings reflecting underlying structures were formed (Polkinghorne, 1989), for example, silent distress, gradual resolution of conflict, proactive decisions about resolving conflict, and nontraditional educational experiences.

Finally, with interest in the concepts of “task-accomplishment” and “convergence,” there was elaborate cross-referencing of various data summaries: charts indicating chronological points where major and minor movement toward accomplishing developmental tasks was apparent, grids showing task-resolution sequences, and categorized linguistic data. Self-assessment ratings of 8 to 10 on questionnaire items related to a particular developmental area represented “task-accomplishment.” Coincidence of one or more task-accomplishments constituted “convergence.”

**Findings**

Of the 14 participants, 3 (21%) responded all seven times, 4 (29%) responded six times, 1 (7%) responded five times, 4 (29%) responded four times, and 2 (14%) responded three times. The responses of 11 of the 14 (79%), some being intermittent, spanned the entire 4-year period, and there was contact with all of the others over a 3-year period. Some reported events retrospectively after not returning the previous questionnaire. Twenty-one percent of the participants did not respond to the final mailing.

**Initial Assessments**

The initial assessments provided information regarding participants’ perception of family stress, cohesion, and adaptability, as well as their satisfaction with their family relationships. The following is a brief summary for the 14 participants:

1. Twelve (86%) communicated low satisfaction with family.
2. Nine (64%) perceived that they had high family stress.
3. Eleven (79%) were “disengaged” regarding family cohesion.
4. Seven (50%) were at the unhealthy extremes of “rigid” or “chaotic” regarding family adaptability.

**Qualitative Analysis Regarding Task-Accomplishment**

**Developmental task-accomplishment.** Only 1 subject, a female who had been an extreme underachiever, experienced stable (i.e., to be sustained throughout the study) resolution of more than one task by the first mailing. Toni had apparently resolved conflict with her parents, established autonomy, and experienced a mature relationship, and her self-ratings in those areas remained high. Those task accomplishments coincided with her academic success in college. Career direction came later, after 2 years.

Ten (71%) of the participants had accomplished at least one developmental task 2 years into the study, several reporting a major change in one area at one time and in a different area at another time. Two more (14%) had experienced the same after 3 years. Seven (50%) participants reported notable progress in at least three areas of development at 4 years. Table 1 summarizes assessments, developmental events, and developmental tasks accomplished for the 14 participants.

**Conflict with parents.** Specifically regarding the resolution of conflict with parents, 7 (50%) participants reported significantly improved relations over the first 2 years of the study, with the comments of Amy, an extreme underachiever, being typical: “[It’s better] because of me maturing and them, especially Dad, letting go of me a bit. I think that I’m a bit more reasonable and submissive than I used to be’ (#4).

However, for the rest, conflict with their parents remained fairly salient through most of the study and generated the most written elaboration for those who added to their questionnaire responses. Language about conflict often reflected struggle with the tasks of achieving autonomy and finding career direction, besides dealing with the past. At the end of the study, only 3 had not resolved conflict with their parents. In the following discussion of conflict and in the subsequent presentation of findings concerning other developmental areas, the number of the mailing will be indicated in parentheses:

#1 (outset of study)
#2 (after 6 months)
#3 (after 1 year)
#4 (after 1½ years)
#5 (after 2 years)
#6 (after 3 years)
#7 (after 4 years).

Cherie, who initially perceived that her family was disen-gaged and “chaotic,” articulated a gradual resolution of conflict with her family. She began the study with intense anger toward
| Subject | Achieved Level | Added Risk | Assessments (Olson, 1990) | After 6 months | After 1 year | After 1½ years | After 2 years | After 3 years | After 4 years | Tasks "done"
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>EU'</td>
<td>Drug use; Depression</td>
<td>HC, HS, LS, Sat 1&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;, Dis, Ch 1&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Ecological institutes</td>
<td>MR/CR&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;, Audubon Inst</td>
<td>Geocommons in India; A</td>
<td>CR; In Nepal</td>
<td>CR; To college</td>
<td>(No report)</td>
<td>A, CR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherie</td>
<td>MA'</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>MC, MS, LSQ&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;, LSQ Sat, Dis, Hlth 1&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>HC, A/D 1&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;; In college</td>
<td>HC; Over past abuse</td>
<td>MR; Conflict diminishes</td>
<td>CR; MR; In college</td>
<td>D/MR; Grad school</td>
<td>A, CR, D, MR</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>MU'</td>
<td>Drug use</td>
<td>MC, HS, LSQ, Dis, Ch adapt 1&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>HC; In college</td>
<td>HC; No college</td>
<td>CR; In college</td>
<td>(Subsequent information invalid)</td>
<td>Baby, Abusive partner</td>
<td>Separates; Back home</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>Dropout; Marriage</td>
<td>LC, HS, LSQ, Dis, Hlth adapt</td>
<td>College; MR A/D, Conc 1&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>A/C; In college</td>
<td>A/D/MR; To new college</td>
<td>A; Separated; Clear goals</td>
<td>Divorced; A/D; In college</td>
<td>Discouraged re: goals; A</td>
<td>A, CR, D, MR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>Absenteeism; Tardiness</td>
<td>HC, HS, LSQ, Hlth coh 1&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;, adapt</td>
<td>In college</td>
<td>(Indirect report: college)</td>
<td>(Indirect report: college)</td>
<td>Engaged, A/C; College success</td>
<td>(Indirect report: graduates)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toni</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>Absenteeism</td>
<td>LC, MS, MSQ 1&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;, Hlth coh, Ch adapt</td>
<td>A/MR/MR; CR; Good academic</td>
<td>A/MR/MR; CR; In college</td>
<td>A/MR/MR; CR; In college</td>
<td>A/MR/MR; CR; In college</td>
<td>A/MR/MR; CR; In college</td>
<td>(New MR; graduates)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>MU</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>HC, HS, LSQ, Hlth coh &amp; adapt</td>
<td>MR, In college</td>
<td>Senses lost h.s. identity</td>
<td>Drops college; Alcohol use</td>
<td>Success in music</td>
<td>Better health</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hal</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>(Unspecified Risks)</td>
<td>LC, HS, LSQ, Dis, Cha adapt</td>
<td>Married/MR, CR, Conc</td>
<td>MR, Low conc; College</td>
<td>A/MR; College</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>Divorced; Less alcohol; Conc</td>
<td>A/CR, Conc; Emotional hlt</td>
<td>A, MR, CR</td>
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<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>MU</td>
<td>Family conflict; Absenteeism</td>
<td>HC, HS, LSQ, Dis, Rigid adapt</td>
<td>A/CR; In college</td>
<td>World travel; A/CR</td>
<td>World travel; A/CR</td>
<td>Time off from college; Home</td>
<td>Struggle re: D; differentiation</td>
<td>Progress re: A; to university</td>
<td>CR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>HA</td>
<td>Family situation</td>
<td>LC, HS, LSQ, Dis, Cha adapt</td>
<td>To distant university; A</td>
<td>Family Concerns; A</td>
<td>A/CR</td>
<td>A/HC; Acetic lifestyle</td>
<td>CR; Better concentration</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>Drug use</td>
<td>MC, LS 1&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;, LSQ, Dis, Healthy adapt</td>
<td>In college</td>
<td>In college</td>
<td>CR; Better conc</td>
<td>(Indirect report: College)</td>
<td>CR; Conc; College again</td>
<td>Improved D, Model/Actor</td>
<td>A, CR, D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>Authority issue; Absenteeism</td>
<td>HC, HS, LSQ, Dis, Rigid adapt</td>
<td>A/D; In college</td>
<td>(Indirect: No college)</td>
<td>(Indirect: Son born; Dancer)</td>
<td>CR; Conc; College again</td>
<td>Improved D, Model/Actor</td>
<td>A, CR, D</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ted</td>
<td>MU</td>
<td>Family situation</td>
<td>MC, MS, LSQ, Dis, Hlth adapt</td>
<td>In college</td>
<td>Improved concentration</td>
<td>Poor concentration</td>
<td>CR; Not in college</td>
<td>CR; Not in college</td>
<td>Family stress; low emot 1&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>Excessive tardiness</td>
<td>LC, LS, MSQ, Dis, Hlth adapt</td>
<td>CR; In college</td>
<td>Drops out of college</td>
<td>Loves snowboarding</td>
<td>CR; Better conc</td>
<td>CR; Better conc</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>A, CR</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

her mother for staying in an abusive marriage, with associated abuse involving her and her siblings. Soon her anger began to be channeled toward her sister, who had also been abusive, but who, during the study, helped Cherie gain insights into a suicide attempt during 10th grade. By the next mailing, her anger was focused on her father, although she had initiated confrontational conversations with him that had helped move them toward resolution of the old conflict.

Kyle, whose initial assessment of family adaptation was “chaotic” and who assessed family cohesion as “disengaged,” wrote about gains in self-understanding when reflecting on conflict with his parents:

- I feel very little conflict. We don’t get too emotionally involved. (#3)
- I identify the conflicts, but often hesitate to act and solve them. (#4)
- I’ve felt some conflict with my mom because I’m rebelling against the “good-child” role I’ve assumed for the greater part of my life. I acted how my parents/teachers/elders wanted me to because I thought that was the only way they’d accept me and give me attention. (#7)

Dan assessed his family at a healthy level of cohesion and adaptation. However, conflict often centered around his lack of career direction. At the end of the study, he was taking steps to reduce conflict, but the fact that he was moving toward a music career (his father’s original direction) now provoked new conflict at home: “Money is the metaphor he uses to express all his concerns about me. He sees a lot of himself in me, perhaps the parts of himself he suppresses” (#7). Dan still thought about these conflicts “every day” at the end of the study.

For Dawn, too, conflict with parents continued throughout the study. After 1 year, she complained as follows:

- My parents do not take me seriously about anything I do, say, or think. They believe I am a crazy drug addict who doesn’t know the first thing about herself or the real world. They offer me financial help, say they want me to be happy. When I want to borrow the money for a car, they say no—traveling around with the Grateful Dead isn’t our idea of happy. You can be happy at college and have $10,000, but not happy anywhere else with $300. (#3)

At the end of the study, she had returned to her parents, with a small child, after divorcing her abusive husband. Her parents were disappointed with her choices, beginning with her short tenure in college, but they were supporting her efforts to regain health and stability.

When asked whether others were aware of their conflict with their parents, 9 of the 14 (64%) participants reported that their distress was not overt. These examples, from males, offer a variety of perceptions: “It’s held within at this point, and will probably not surface until later.” “The problems really give me a lot of stress, but I don’t think anyone has noticed.” “[They] discover I’m feeling bad in other ways, like being sullen and having a short temper.”

There was evidence that various factors contributed to a reduction of conflict and movement toward differentiation and autonomy. Besides Cherie’s dramatic confrontations with her parents and sister, 5 participants mentioned distance from home and 3 made strategic decisions about their relationship with their family. James explained that his perspective had changed: “It’s the only family I have, and it’s my responsibility to make it work. No more blaming anyone else for how I feel” (#6). Adopting a lifestyle that was not approved by parents was a factor for 4 others, and developing a mature relationship was reported to be a turning point for another.

Career focus. Only 5 (36%) participants (4 females; 1 male) had a clear career focus by the end of the study. These were well on their way to becoming a model/actor, a drama teacher, a family-science academic, an economist/politician, and a paleontologist. Cherie, one of these individuals, had changed her focus annually until the final year, from teaching, to environmental studies, to counseling adolescents, to family science/psychology. In the end, this former moderate achiever was the only participant preparing to enter graduate school, and her changing focus seemed to have been a logical progression toward her eventual choice, representing commitment after crisis (Marcia, 1980). Three more participants had become serious about making a decision, including James: “I’m getting to the point where I want a job with meaning, something I sincerely care about. I’m staying out of school until I would know why I was there” (#7).

At least once during the study, the language of Kyle, Amy, Dan, Denise, and Cherie pointedly reflected struggles with multipotentiality. At 6 months, multitalented Dan, for example, articulated a fear of commitment: “I’m afraid of focusing in on anything because of this irrational fear that I’ll be locked into it for life if I choose a major” (#2). At 2 years, he mentioned four viable options. At 4 years, he was still experiencing crisis without commitment (Marcia, 1980), although music, not among the four options he had listed earlier, looked promising as a career.

Most of the other participants remained generally undirected throughout the study. Lack of direction may have affected their ability to concentrate on academic work, reflected in the mean self-rating for concentration (6.7, 1–10
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scale) of the 10 participants whose ratings were available at the end of the study.

The parents of Amy, an extreme underachiever in high school, responded to her lack of motivation for college by financing several field experiences with environmentally oriented organizations, which enlarged her view while not necessarily contributing to purposeful planning. She articulated her experience regarding finding direction: "All my life's major decision experiences were very spontaneous, last-minute, random decisions all made within 2 weeks of my leaving. Things just seem to happen to me" (#3). However, the environmental experiences engaged her more than high school had: "Instead of just learning the same old crap that everybody has to learn in high school, I've been developing my interests much more" (#2).

One year later, her language continued to reflect growing motivation, but she was still without clear focus: "I would like to quit being transient, settle down at a college. I'd like to start learning more about environmental studies and wildlife, and also I'd like to explore my art a bit more" (#4). However, after 6 months, her morale again matched her lack of clarity: "Confusion! I think I'm beginning to stray from environmental studies. What next?" (#5).

Eventually, like Dan, Amy reconciled herself to college studies, still without a clear goal, suggesting crisis without commitment (Marcia, 1980):

Traveling has impacted my career goals. I now feel I would like to do international work. But, last night I just had an identity crisis and thought maybe I have no clue what my interests are. I will most likely be going to [college] this fall. There are no classes that really excite me. I'm kind of caught in a negative rut. (#6)

Tom rated himself at "1" in career direction each time he responded. After 1 year, avocationally serious about snowboarding, he dropped out of college, but remained in the college town: "I wasn't giving it any effort, and I didn't have any goals" (#3). One year later, he revealed that his outward lack of concern masked serious concern: "I think my parents would like to know what I'm going to do, but so would I" (#5). However, he continued to epitomize no crisis and no commitment (Marcia, 1980).

At the end of the study, Ted had spent 2 years at home after dropping out of college. He felt stuck, 1 of 9 without clear direction, 7 of those also lacking the ability to concentrate on academic work:

I don't have any academic interest. Absolute chaos. Mostly biting regrets all day for 2 years. I don't know if I could change majors, interests, or what. Screwing up academically really unnerved me. I really got my confidence beaten up. (#7)

He articulated his struggle for identity—and emotional balance:

What keeps me going isn't so charming. It's more like a guy in a corner who snarls a lot and gets punched a lot, but refuses to concede that he is nobody. He is very stubborn. Does he invite abuse? Does he make mistakes on purpose? I can't tell. (#7)

Martin was likewise undirected. After 6 months, fascinated by "Buddhism, Taoism, the Beat authors," he wrote the following:

I have been going through a process of self-liberation in thought. This, I expect, will eventually translate into action, which will test my parents' ability to accept me. This is unfortunate, but unavoidable. Life is too short for compromise. It seems that usually, as we get older, our dreams get smaller. I refuse to let that happen to me. (#2)

At 1 year, working 70 hours per week, he rated his career direction as "8" (1–10 scale) and expressed interest in small business and advertising. However, 6 months later, he was at "6," reporting that he didn't "really much plan for the future." After 3 years, he was at "0," noting, "I'm far more than just a worker." He added this:

I'm at a point where my religious beliefs and self-advancement are such that I can go into the world and fall into situations where I can help people (compassion being spontaneous) and direct lost souls to the path of moderation and serenity. (#6)

Martin was an atypical participant in his emphasis on religious ideology, and he did not appear to follow an occupation-then-ideology sequence (Dellas & Jernigan, 1990).

Autonomy. The language of most study participants revealed steady gains in autonomy over the course of the study. Six (43%) felt autonomous after 6 months, including Toni, for whom several strands had converged: "As you know, I make all decisions regarding my life. I would find any other arrangement unacceptable. I've always been very independent. I thank my parents for that every day" (#2).

Sometimes an "event" marked progress, as when snowboarder Tom made a move after 1½ years: "I just moved into a house with some friends, and it's the first time I've had my own place, not a dorm or someone else's place. It's really cool" (#4).
At 2 years, 3 more reported autonomy. After 4 years, all
but 3 males and 1 female reported a sense of independence and
self-sufficiency. However, the process was by no means smooth
or easy for most. Denise, who had dropped out of high school
and married the next year, struggled financially and with her
marriage, not with her parents, and divorced before the end of
the study. At the end, she felt autonomous and relieved: “I’m all
alone out here now. I like it that way” (#7).

Similarly, Martin was unconcerned that his extreme inde-
pendence was “simply too much for some people.” His level
of conflict with parents was high, though he kept his distance:
“They know very little about me and my life. This is how I
like it because it affords me greater freedom to pursue my own
paths” (#6).

Kyle was still struggling with self-sufficiency after 3 years,
but was forming a resolve: He would stop focusing more on
others’ views than on his own when making decisions. He had
made progress a year later, but did not report a level of auton-
omy typical of most others in the study at that point. Ted, too,
lacked autonomy: “I know how to do laundry, money, some
food. But, that isn’t independence. Mom and Dad still pay for
my school, so I feel bad when I think about how little I am
working and learning at their expense” (#2). He was attending
college back home at the end of the study and believed he
understood what had blocked progress toward autonomy: “I
want to be away from my parents, family, music teacher, home-
town—everything that contributed to past indecision at [a
distant school]. I didn’t commit to anything there, thinking I
was losing time [with music]” (#7).

By contrast, Peter, who had been on his own since before
leaving high school and had since fathered a child, added an
insight after 4 years: “Independence came a long time ago.
Now, I’m finally starting to get to know myself” (#7).

Maturity in relationships. Only 6 participants (4 females; 2
males) experienced what they considered a mature and sta-
ble relationship, and only 3 of those were still in such a rela-
tionship at the end of the study.

Amy, who had international environmental experiences,
assessed her relationships after 1½ years: “My love relation-
ships are definitely becoming more mature and stable” (#4).
At 3 years, she rated the maturity of her most recent relation-
ship a “7” (1-10 scale): “The ‘open’ relationship I have been
involved in for the past 2 years is both a source of extreme
happiness and of extreme confusion” (#6).

One year into the study, Toni, who had experienced a con-
vergence of task-accomplishments early, wrote that her long-
term relationship had “done wonders for my self-esteem.” At
3 years, she reported that the relationship had dissolved (“We
grew up to be different people”), but she had been in a stable,
new relationship for many months. Cherie, who married after
2 conflict-filled years in the study, articulated her new experi-
ence: “I never dreamed that my life would be this fulfilled.
We’ve had struggles, mostly over issues related to my sexual
abuse. We’re going through a good time right now. We have
really good communication” (#5).

Besides these, all others were still waiting to experience a
mature, stable relationship. Three males wrote the following
late in the study: “The last real relationship destroyed me,
made me completely distrust all women” (#7). “The past year,
I feel as if I’ve forced myself into relationships, just to be loved”
(#6). “My last relationship taught me how, for me, it’s far more
important to focus on my life than on another’s” (#6).

In the course of the study, 2 males revealed that they were
gay. One of them wrote this: “I’m an extremely sensitive person,
which makes being with other people for long periods of time
difficult. This makes a long-term relationship difficult” (#7).

Sequence and convergence regarding task-accomplishment.
Autonomy was the developmental task resolved earliest for the
largest number of individuals, with 6 (3 females; 3 males)
reporting self-sufficiency after 6 months. At that point, 4 of the
14 participants (1 female; 3 males) had resolved conflict with
their parents, and 4 (2 males; 2 females) had experienced a
mature relationship. However, only 1 of the females main-
tained this level of mature relationship throughout the study.
At 2 years, 3 more females and 1 more male also had had a
mature and stable relationship.

Resolving conflict with parents was part of a convergence of
task-accomplishments for 6 of the 8 individuals for whom
convergence occurred, and achieving autonomy appears to
have prepared 2 individuals for a later convergence. For Jane,
2 years into the study, convergence of all four major task-
accomplishments over a span of 1 year coincided with per-
ceived ability to concentrate on academic work. For Toni, at 6
months, accomplishing three tasks coincided with ability to
concentrate on academics. Ability to concentrate accompanied
some kind of convergence for 4 of the 8 persons in the
study who experienced convergence.

Life events. In response to an open-ended question, respond-
ents at the end of the study discussed a variety of events that
had had a great impact on them. Of interest here is the fact that
most events had happened after high school, and there was
usually the implication that these experiences had influenced
direction, affected self-confidence, or provoked developmental-
mental movement. The following are examples: the death of
friends, moving away from home, successful and unsuccessful
relationships, drug use, college courses, deciding to leave or
return to college, new church affiliation, marriage, marital sep-
oration and dissolution, reading Alice Walker, changing majors,
fathering a child, watching friends graduate from college, not
finding a good job, contracting herpes, finding Prozac.

Some “events” spanned many months: dealing painfully
with childhood sexual abuse (“I suspect that each new life-
course transition will include another 'down' time); understanding the effects of a father's authoritarian parenting; sensing a reversal of roles with an older brother; experiencing depression in self or sibling; coming to grips with sexual orientation; suffering from physical problems; ‘rounding off the edges’ at a job that required interacting with the public; understanding family systems. In the end, all who had experienced long depression during adolescence perceived that they had good, or at least much improved, emotional health. Four individuals reported difficulties related to substance use; 2 indicated use throughout the study.

Unsolicited responses. Eight of the 14 participants sometimes enclosed letters. One of the 2 females with four strong college years after extreme underachievement during high school offered her thoughts on achievement motivation after 1½ years in the study:

In high school, I had to struggle with several factors, most of which had little to do with academic education. I believe most kids do. My grades were never especially good because of this. I don’t regret that, looking back. I matured mentally over this time and learned things through experience that I would never have learned from a textbook. I succeeded as I always knew I would once I was able to grow emotionally, more prepared for life than someone who grows only academically. I am pleased with how I “turned out.”

Discussion

By the end of the study, 3 (all female) of the 14 participants had graduated from college, including 2 extreme underachievers. Five more had had at least 3 years of college. Four of those and 3 more had resumed college after taking time off and having growth-stimulating nonacademic experiences. Illuminating events for these 14 participants occurred largely after they had left high school, according to their responses to an open-ended question at the end of the study. This study offers insights into these and other patterns and processes of post-high-school development in gifted individuals.

Career Focus

After 4 years, 9 participants lacked clear career focus, whether they had been in college or not, and whether they had experienced “crisis” (Marcia, 1980) or not. However, several of the students without clear focus or without 4 years of college might be envied for their unusual experiences by those on more conventional tracks: participating in programs in India and Nepal, working in ecological projects in the United States, working for pay in fossil digs, dancing professionally in Japan, playing in a regional symphony orchestra, and writing songs and performing with guitar in increasingly important gigs. James, 1 of 4 who claimed no career direction, had traveled around the globe, crossed the United States several times in several directions in the same purposeful mode, and spent periods of time in Central America, New Zealand, and the Far East, financing his trips and supporting himself with seasonal work in Alaska. Jane, who graduated from college after 4 years with clear direction, had spent a “semester at sea” for college credit. Kyle, without clear direction, had attended an Ivy League college, but rejected it to work in a bank during a long period of personal and family stress. He later returned to that school and eventually graduated with honors, according to an informal report after the study ended.

Establishing career direction appears to be difficult for some at-risk, multitalented individuals and reflects the literature about multipotentiality (Rysiew et al., 1999). Many possibilities for 5 participants made commitment difficult. Reflecting findings in a previous study (Peterson, 2000), direction did not come soon after high school for these at-risk gifted individuals. Even when direction was established, contrary to previous research (Eisen, 1987; Farmer, 1985), there was no consistent relationship between direction and ability to concentrate on academics. However, resolving conflict with parents, gaining autonomy, or both preceded or converged with finding direction in 4 of the 5 cases where career focus occurred.

Autonomy

Qualitative changes were reflected in the narrative language of these gifted individuals. Independence and self-sufficiency came gradually, encouraged by distance and frustrated during time at home, with financial independence representing the final break for many. Elaborate responses indicated that the differentiation process involved changes in self-talk and proactive, difficult decisions about stopping the binding conflict and paying attention to one’s “bliss,” as Dan wrote. Differentiation also involved parents’ “letting go,” as noted in the language of 3 participants, who recognized parental struggles as well as their own. Although 10 (71%) reported autonomy by the end of the study, for 2 of those it came only after 2 years. Of all 14 subjects, 57% achieved autonomy first among the four tasks, either alone or together with one or more of the other three tasks. The autonomous participants believed they were emotionally healthy; those without autonomy did not.

Resolution of Conflict With Parents

The low satisfaction with family and high family stress that characterized the group at the outset of the study, across all
achievement levels, predicted that conflict with parents, and resolution of that conflict, would be significant in developmental processes. Reflecting the literature connecting high ability with active exploration of identity (Erikson, 1968), active exploration of identity with conflict with parents (Kidwell et al., 1995), and conflict with autonomy-striving (Blos, 1979; Collins et al., 1997), conflict with parents generated the largest amount of written elaboration. Resolution of that conflict appeared to be associated with differentiation and also with accomplishing other developmental tasks. In addition, the fact that 79% assessed their families as “disengaged” at the outset of the study might reflect the poor attachment that can contribute to premature separation, insufficient guidance, and lack of direction (Eigen et al., 1987), the last characterizing the majority of participants here. Their disengagement might also have affected high school achievement and delayed commitment to post-high-school education (Wood et al., 1988). Similarly, initial high conflict and reactivity, even at great geographical distance, may have interfered with differentiation, including finding direction, for 5 individuals (Hoffman, 1975), although distance may have contributed to developmental progress in 6 others (Gottesfeld & Mirsky, 1991). That 56% of those who achieved autonomy during the study also found direction suggests support for the literature connecting separation and commitment (Blustein et al., 1991).

A Mature Relationship

Developing maturity and stability in a partner-relationship occurred for less than half of the participants during the study period, and, for exactly half of the participants, the tasks related to commitment (relationship and direction) were yet to be accomplished, perhaps reflecting a lack of differentiation (Zingaro, 1983). However, experiencing a mature relationship was part of a convergence of task-achievements for 6, and, for 3 of those, the convergence included resolution of conflict with parents. For those 3, a relationship may have been a buffer against family conflict, important if conflict is somehow related to the ability to concentrate on academic work.

Convergence

The fact that 4 of the 8 participants who experienced a convergence of task accomplishments also reported improved ability to concentrate on academic work suggests that accomplishing developmental tasks may be related to peace of mind. Resolution of conflict was involved in 75% of the instances of convergence. Conflict may actually have built resiliency and confidence in some subjects, such as the three extreme-achiever females who did well in college. In contrast, the years after high school may have challenged the confidence of others: 4 individuals reported depression, and 5 more reported below-average emotional health at least once. That so many of these highly capable individuals were silent in their distress may serve as a warning about vulnerability to stress-related disorders, including eating disorders, substance abuse, and depression.

Achievers Versus Underachievers

There appeared to be little distinction between achievers and underachievers in terms of articulated struggles with developmental challenges. As an ironic example, 2 male National Merit Scholars in the study, one a high achiever and the other a moderate underachiever, were not in college 2 years after high school graduation, both involved in intense and complex developmental processes. At the end of the study, they were back in school, but had had little success in three and four developmental areas, respectively, although 1 noted positive changes in himself as a result of dropping out (Valine, 1976). Reflecting the literature connecting achievement and cohesion (Hall, Jugovic, & Lee, 2001), 2 of the 3 participants who perceived initially that their families had a healthy level of cohesion were the two extreme-achiever females who had finished college at the end of the study.

Limitations and Future Directions

The generalizability of this study is limited by the small size and homogeneity of the sample, even though the homogeneity helps to keep the focus on development, without major and obvious confounding factors. The homogeneity also focuses attention on underachievement among White, middle-class students (Colangelo, Kerr, Christensen, & Maxey, 1993), which is often unrecognized (Emerick, 1992). Another limitation is the age range, which, even though small, precludes assessing progress according to specific age or for each year following high school. Nevertheless, the narrative data offer a rare and credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) glimpse of how gifted individuals with specific risk factors experienced development, and “naturalistic generalization” (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990, p. 208) allows for the application of the findings to similar situations.

Future confirmatory studies might employ a culturally varied and larger sample, with equal gender numbers and achievement levels to be more conducive to comparisons, and begin only at graduation. Exploratory and confirmatory studies of identity development, which are lacking in the literature related to giftedness, could focus on high-school-aged students. In addition, studies might compare at-risk and non-at-risk populations, although researchers should be aware that risk factors in gifted individuals may be thoroughly masked, making determinations about risk difficult (Peterson, 2001).
Researchers might also explore appropriate individual and family counseling interventions for at-risk gifted students during high school or during the years following graduation. On the basis of the findings here, attention to affective concerns and active support during times of conflict appear to be advisable during and after high school.

**Conclusion**

The majority of the 14 gifted participants struggled during the years after high school. The process of resolving conflict with parents generated the most attention in written elaboration, and that resolution often converged with other task-accomplishments. Direction and a mature, stable relationship were still lacking at the end of the study for the majority, but most subjects felt autonomous and reported good emotional health. For half of those experiencing convergence of developmental successes, multiple task-accomplishment was associated with being able to concentrate on academics.

Twelve of the participants were on their way to college when the study began. Eight were enrolled during the fourth year of the study, 6 after taking time off. The 2 achievers in the study, who both took time off, and 3 extreme underachievers, who had academic success, had surprising outcomes given their previous academic performance. Several others had significant, positive, growth-promoting, nontraditional educational and personal experiences. Though educators and parents may have assumed the worst, the majority of these highly capable individuals grappled effectively with the challenge of differentiation in terms of taking responsibility for their own well-being and destiny. Some remained at risk for poor personal outcomes, educational outcomes, or both, whether in college or not. However, in almost every case, even those who were still struggling with one or more developmental tasks had made progress toward accomplishing them.

**References**


