

Self-Concept, Self-Esteem, and Peer Relations Among Gifted Children Who Feel "Different"*

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Abstract

Two-hundred seventy-one elementary age high-IQ children and their parents completed an extensive battery of questions on social and emotional development. Eighty-eight children (37%) conceptualized themselves as differing from their peers. Although they described differences in a positive fashion, and although their self-esteem was above the mean reported for a large normative sample, it was lower than that of high-IQ children who did not think of themselves as being different. Furthermore, the reports about peer relations given by children who thought themselves different contained more signs suggesting difficulties than did those of children who did not. These results suggest that many cognitively gifted children need increased psychological support if they are to optimize their personal and social development.

Self-esteem refers to the value that people attach to their self-descriptions (Bean & Lipka, 1980; Harter, 1983). Among unselected children, self-esteem has been found to correlate positively with academic achievement (Harter, 1983; Johnson & Kanoy, 1980; Wylie, 1979), psychological adjustment (Brownfain, 1952; Taylor & Coombs, 1952), successful social relationships (Coleman, Herzberg, & Morris, 1977; Grove, 1980; Rosenberg, 1968), and personality traits such as self-confidence, self-expression, effort, and leadership (Rosenberg, 1965). These associations are also found among high-IQ children (Tannenbaum, 1983). While data suggest that self-esteem follows rather than precedes these manifestations (Harter, 1983), few data as yet exist upon which to base conclusions regarding the direction of the causal relationships (Wylie, 1979). It is likely that self-esteem both enhances and is enhanced by successes in various areas. Consequently, the determination that a child's self-esteem compares unfavorably with others' signals the need for further psychosocial assessment.

The vast majority of high-IQ children show satisfactory, though not necessarily superior, self-esteem in comparison with children not identified as having high IQs (Colangelo & Pfleger, 1978; Janos & Robinson, 1984; Lehman & Erdwins, 1981; Tidwell, 1980; Winne, Woodlands, & Wong, 1982). The literature is, however, not consistent (Kelly & Colangelo, 1984), and high-IQ children sometimes do compare

unfavorably with other groups (Bracken, 1980; Glenn, 1978; Klein & Cantor, 1976; Milgram & Milgram, 1976). Certain subgroups of the gifted population have consistently been found to exhibit a less satisfactory picture. Learning disabled gifted children (Senf, 1983) and underachieving gifted children (Saurenman & Michael, 1980; Whitmore, 1980), for example, often exhibit disturbances in self-esteem. Gifted children, not identified as having problems but merely as participants in gifted programs, have also sometimes been observed to manifest diminished self-esteem in comparison with other gifted children and with norms (Fults, 1980; Rodgers, 1979; Stopper, 1978), although enhanced self-esteem has been more frequently observed in children enrolled in special programs (Coleman & Fults, 1982; Karnes & Wherry, 1981; Kolloff & Feldhusen, 1984; Maddux, Scheiber, & Bass, 1982).

The study reported below focuses on high-IQ children who report thinking of themselves as being different from their agemates, and on the affective consequences of having "differentness" as a part of one's self-concept. This focus was suggested by Freeman's (1979) finding that the question "Do you think your child feels different from other children?" proved to be the most discriminating of 217 variables included in her study. She compared 70 high-IQ (mean Stanford-Binet IQ = 147) elementary and middle school age children whose parents were members of the British National Association for Gifted Children (BNAGC) with 70 high-IQ (mean IQ = 134) peers whose parents had not joined the NAGC, and 70 children not identified as having high IQ (mean IQ = 119). Fifty-one percent of the children whose parents had joined the NAGC were described as feeling "different," compared with 3% each in the two comparison groups. Furthermore, these children had considerably more difficulties than either of the other groups, including disturbed sleep patterns, hyperactivity, showing off, and peer maladaptiveness. Fifty-two percent of the maladjusted children in her sample were judged by their parents to feel different from other children.

One might assume that for high-IQ children, conceptualizing oneself as different from (i.e., more intellectually capable than) agemates would lead to positive self-regard. On the other hand, a feeling of difference may foster a sense of loneliness and isolation, with the suspicion, therefore, that "something must be wrong with me." Self-concept and peer relations have been observed to be negatively affected when gifted children are made to stand out (Gallagher, Greenman, Karnes, & King, 1960). The onus of being

*The longitudinal study was initiated by the late Halbert B. Robinson and colleagues and was supported by grants from the Spencer Foundation. Partial support for preparation of this report was provided by the William H. Donner Foundation.

labeled "gifted" (Hamilton, 1960; Weiss, 1980) may affect a child's developing self-concept negatively (Torrance, 1968). Children may be disturbed by the degree to which they conform to the stereotype of an "egghead," "bookworm," or "nerd." Overemphasis by parents and teachers on intellectual performance may also produce a narrow orientation to life, a crippling sense of superiority, and alienation from other children (Hollingworth, 1942).

In the following study, high-IQ children of elementary age were asked, "Do you feel different from other children?" It was specifically hypothesized that a significant proportion of these children would think of themselves as being different from agemates, and that although they would describe the differences as positive, they would manifest lower self-esteem. It was further hypothesized that children who think of themselves as being different would manifest more difficulties in their thinking about peer relations.

Method

This project was conducted at the Child Development Research Group (CDRG) at the University of Washington, its subjects a subset of a group of children participating in a longitudinal study on the early identification of intellectual precocity. The subjects were drawn from the Puget Sound region, mostly from Seattle and its environs, during the years 1974 through 1979.

Selection for the longitudinal study was essentially a two-step process. First, parents who contacted the CDRG in response to articles in local newspapers or to word-of-mouth publicity were asked to complete a lengthy questionnaire about their children's early mental development. Those children whose parents reported evidence of intellectual precocity were invited to complete additional tests and questionnaires. Five-hundred fifty children did so, although not all of these children subsequently achieved IQ scores normally considered indicative of giftedness. Forty-one of the 550 were subsequently dropped from the study at the parents' request, or because psychometric data were incomplete.

In 1981-1982, an effort was made to contact the families of the remaining 509 subjects who had been tested at least once. Unfortunately, because procedures had not been established to maintain contact with the families, at least 50 of the invitations were returned by the postal service as undeliverable. Potential participants in the follow-up were, then, at maximum 450, of whom 60% responded. The 271 children (139 boys, 132 girls) for whom responses were received in the 1981-1982 wave of data collection constitute the present subject sample. While these children may not be representative of intellectually gifted children at large, they are probably representative of those whose parents volunteer for and remain involved with research and service ventures serving the gifted population.

The subject sample of this study ranged in age from 5.6 to 10.6 years. Their mean age was 8.1 years (*s.d.* = 2.26 years) when data were collected. The mean score on intelligence

tests given at the mean age of 5.5 years (*s.d.* = 1.4 years) was 139.9 (*s.d.* = 18.8) on the short form of the Stanford-Binet (starred items; Terman & Merrill, 1973).

All of the data analyzed in this study were obtained from questionnaires mailed to parents and children. Questionnaires were completed by respondents in their own homes, without the assistance of project staff. The questionnaires for parents included the Child Behavior Checklist (CBC) (Achenbach, 1979; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981), which assesses social competence and behavior problems. In this study, the dependent variable extracted from the CBC was the Total Problems Scale, which addresses both problems experienced by the child and problems caused by the child. Also administered to parents was the Survey Form of the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales (Sparrow, Balla, & Cicchetti, 1984), which assesses the child's maturity in a variety of domains. Those domains utilized as dependent variables in this study included the Communication, Socialization, and Daily Living scales, which measure, respectively, what the child understands, says, reads, and writes; how the child interacts with others, plays, and uses leisure time, and demonstrates responsibility and sensitivity; and how the child eats, dresses, and practices personal hygiene, performs household tasks, and uses time, money, and the telephone. The Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1981) was administered to tap variables relating to family climate. Lastly, parents were asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire which asked for demographic information and data regarding their child's academic trajectory and satisfaction therewith.

Questionnaires were, as noted above, also administered to the children. In particular, they were asked to complete the 80-item Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers & Harris, 1969), which was designed for research on the development of children's self-attitudes and correlates of these attitudes. Harter (1983) and Wylie (1974) provide evidence that the Total Positives scale, which appears to measure whether one's self-evaluation is basically positive or negative, is one of the better measures of self-esteem available. Six additional subscales were analyzed: Behavior, Intellectual and School Status, Physical Appearance and Attributes, Anxiety, Popularity, and Happiness and Satisfaction. Children also completed an instrument which elicited reports of their friendships. They were asked whether or not their friends were of their own age, whether they had at least one good friend, whether they had "too few" friends, whether being smart made it harder to make friends, whether they were as friendly as other children, and how often they played with other children. Last, in a question which was considered to tap an aspect of self-concept, children were asked whether they thought of themselves as being different from other children.

Results

All (100%) of the parents completed the follow-up ques-

tionnaire; 87% completed the CBC, 88% the Vineland. Eighty-three percent of the children completed the Piers-Harris. Ninety-eight percent responded to the friendship questionnaire, but only 88% indicated whether they perceived themselves as being different from agemates. Many of them attempted to detail the differences they perceived.

Although the literature addressing self-concept in gifted children has occasionally reported sex differences (Kelly & Colangelo, 1984), no sex differences appeared in IQ ($t(236) = .13; p = .62$), Total Positives on the Piers-Harris ($t(218) = -1.61; p = .11$), or in the number of girls or boys indicating they felt different from their age peers (chi square (1) = .258; $p = .61$). As expected, there was the trend on the Child Behavior Checklist for boys to have more difficulties than girls ($t(220) = 1.77; p = .06$).

The central hypotheses underlying this investigation were: that a substantial portion of high-IQ children would think of themselves as being different from age peers, that they would conceptualize the difference in positive terms, and that they would exhibit diminished self-esteem. Of 238 children who responded to the question, 88 (37%) thought of themselves as being "different" from their agemates. Of the 71 who listed reasons for thinking thus, 35 (50%) described the difference in positive terms (e.g., "bigger," "stronger," "draw better," "smarter," "read better," "feel more mature"), and 32 gave neutral statements, such as "I really can't explain it," "I don't know," and "I act different." Only four children gave any indication that their difference was negative. Child A wrote, "I feel too smart for them to like me." Child B wrote, "I think I'm too smart." Child C wrote, "Being in a different grade makes me out of place near them." Child D wrote, "I look different. I feel stupid, sort of." As can be seen from these quotations, even so-called "negative" remarks have substantially positive aspects in three instances.

Despite the fact that almost all the children who detailed their differences from agemates did so in a neutral or positive manner, and very few indeed described the differences as negative, the mean Total Positives score on the Piers-Harris for the 88 children who thought of themselves as "different" was significantly lower than the mean score of the remaining 150 children ($t(236) = 2.22; p < .001$). The two groups were also compared on each of the six factor scales able to be scored by procedures contained in the Piers-Harris manual (Behavior, Intellectual & School Status, Physical Appearance and Attributes, Anxiety, Popularity, and Happiness & Satisfaction). In all of these comparisons, the children who thought of themselves as different scored in a less favorable direction, except on the Anxiety scale. The most significant difference was on the Popularity scale (see Table 1). The group that thought of themselves as different did not differ from the comparison group in age, parents' education, IQ, participation in a special educational program, any of the social maturity domains measured by the Vineland, family climate subscales measured by the

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Responses to the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale

	Different (N = 88)	Not Different (N = 150)
Behavior	13.91 (2.9)*	14.75 (1.8)
Intellectual & School Status	14.00 (3.1)*	14.88 (2.1)
Physical Appearance & Attributes	9.71 (3.1)	10.30 (2.2)
Anxiety ^a	10.24 (2.9)*	10.97 (2.1)
Popularity	8.17 (2.7)**	9.32 (2.3)
Happiness & Satisfaction	8.64 (2.1)*	9.22 (1.2)
Total Positives ^b	63.12 (12.8)**	65.75 (8.6)

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

^a lower score is more favorable

^b Piers and Harris (1969) list the mean score on the Total Positives scale for a normative group of 1,183 grade school children as 51.87 (s.d. = 13.87).

FES, or number of behavior problems measured by the Achenbach. Within the total sample, however, Total Positives scores on the Piers-Harris were negatively correlated with age ($r(215) = -.20; p = .004$) and with CBC behavior problems ($r(212) = -.215; p = .002$).

Thinking of oneself as different proved to be associated with more than diminished self-esteem. It was predicted that children who saw themselves as different would report more difficulties in their relations with other children. This proved to be the case on four of the six friendship questions. Children who saw themselves as different more often reported that they had too few friends (chi square (1) = 3.49; $p < .01$) and that being smart made it harder to make friends (chi square (1) = 12.6; $p < .001$). Children who saw themselves as different more often reported that their friends were older or younger than themselves (chi square (1) = 4.47; $p < .005$) and that they rarely played with other children (chi square (1) = 3.85; $p < .01$). Children who saw themselves as being different were like the other children in that they reported having at least one good friend and being as friendly as other children.

Discussion

This study may be briefly summarized as follows. A group of gifted children whose parents had maintained participation in a longitudinal study were asked whether they thought of themselves as being different from their agemates and, if so, why they did. Almost 40% of the children said they thought of themselves as different, fully half of these stating that they were superior in some way to their agemates. Only four worded the difference in a manner which might be conceivably interpreted as being negative. Nevertheless, self-esteem scores for the group that saw themselves as different from agemates were significantly

lower than those of children who did not. Furthermore, they also reported somewhat more difficulty in their relationships with agemates, although their parents did not describe them as exhibiting more behavioral problems. These results are consistent with an analysis of the literature, which suggested that conceptualizing oneself as being different from other children may be felt as more negative than positive.

While the results of this study suggest that children who think of themselves as different fail to optimize in psychological and social terms, it would not do to overstate the case. Self-esteem, certainly, is not critically low in many, if any, of the children. High-IQ children participating in this study, both those who felt different from agemates and those who did not, scored above norms on the Piers-Harris for children not identified as gifted. Piers-Harris norms may, however, underestimate the self-esteem of children not identified as gifted (Coleman & Fults, 1982).

Children who think they are superior to other children may have objective reasons for their beliefs, including validating reports from parents and teachers. Yet, objective superiority does not translate into heightened psychological well-being or enhanced social experience. Children who are "egotistical," "have a big head," or otherwise share their sense of superiority with others are subject to punishing feedback from many sources. Peers, whose evaluations are certainly highly salient to all children (Hartup, 1983), may not respond at all well to such observations, whether the source is an age peer, parent, neighbor, or teacher. Adults, too, dislike self-aggrandizing children. Gifted children, unfortunately, may be caught in a subtle trap. In many ways they are socialized to capitalize on their superiority, but alienation awaits mismanagement of that task.

While the most likely explanation for the results described above resides in negative social experiences, it is also possible that mere awareness of one's own intellectual superiority and atypical interest patterns diminishes self-esteem. Children may experience a need to minimize differences from peers, but lack methods for constructively doing so. It is virtually certain that an enlightened adult can provide support in managing this problem, but we know of no studies that have addressed instructional interactions of this type.

The data of this study did not directly address why some gifted children thought of themselves as being different from their agemates while others did not, or why this had negative consequences for their self-esteem. That a sense of self being different was paralleled by differences in the children's reports of their friendships, and not by differences in age, participation in special programs, social maturity, behavioral problems, family climate, or parents' education, suggests that qualitative peer interactions may be mediating factors. However, no studies have, to our knowledge, examined the processes by which gifted children successfully or unsuccessfully engage agemates.

Our clinical observations of high-IQ children suggest that some of them tend to overgeneralize the domains of superiority, and focus on differences from, rather than similarities to, other children. In Leta Stetter Hollingworth's (1942) terms, these children "do not suffer fools gladly," and some of their parents do little better. At the same time, these children may suffer from exclusion by their peers, and do not seem well trained in using their intelligence to solve that problem. They need help in gaining a balanced view of their own self-worth in a social as well as intellectual context. Children who are not fortunate enough to find congenial peers may require long-term support, while they, their parents, teachers, and other professionals plan aggressively for their eventually joining a compatible social network.

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Correction Note

on the article by Patricia Weber and Catherine Battaglia
which appeared in the 1985 Winter Issue.

On page 43, Figures 5 and 6, the numerals were accidentally omitted from the sample case studies. For information to correct this error, write to Patricia Weber, 6807 Akron Road, Lockport, New York 14094.