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Achievement Barriers of Gifted Young Women from Five Ethnic Groups

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Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1993) comprised the theoretical framework of this national qualitative study. His theory offers an alternative view of intelligence from the traditional IQ score and provides "a useful framework within which to consider the broad range of individual competencies" (Gardner, 1993, p. 238). It suggests a "more pluralistic notion of intelligence, in order to account for individuals' diverse abilities both to pursue various domains of knowledge and to create new ones" (Gardner, 1993, p. 237). Gardner claimed that human intelligence is pluralistic in nature, and he pointed out seven basic intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, and two forms of personal intelligence---interpersonal and intrapersonal-- and later added naturalistic and existential intelligence. For the purposes of this study, only six of the intelligences were used. Intrapersonal, naturalistic and existential intelligences were omitted.

Explaining the development of these various intelligences in humans, Gardner (1993) stated, "The natural trajectory of development in each intelligence begins with raw patterning ability. . . The 'raw' intelligence predominates during the first year of life." (p. 28) He further shared the subsequent stages of intelligence development, as the intelligence is encountered through a symbol system and a notational system, with the intelligences ultimately being expressed through the range of vocational and avocational pursuits. He made a strong case that schools should be in the business of developing intelligences and helping people reach vocational and avocational goals.

Methods

This study used a phenomenological multiple-case design with a sample including 30 young women of various ethnicities representing six of Gardner's multiple intelligences.

Replication logic was a key component of the design, emphasizing the search not for similar results (a literal replication) or contrasting results, but for understandable reasons (a theoretical replication). Essential to these replication procedures was a rich theoretical framework which suggested conditions for a particular phenomenon. Interviews were employed as the data collection tool. Seven stages of data collection and analysis included: thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting (Kvale, 1996).

Snowball chain sampling was utilized. This process involved asking knowledgeable people to recommend gifted young women for participation in the study. In that way, we identified an increasing number of knowledgeable people and an increasing number of recommended cases, all or some of whom were included in the sample (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). One of the researchers contacted subjects and set up interview time and place, obtained consent from the subjects to participate in the study, took notes and audiotaped each interview. Abbreviated names were used for all participants to protect the identity of human subjects. Three additional researchers triangulated the data by reviewing the 320 pages of interview transcripts and by making notes on possible themes, patterns and conclusions. We discussed the findings to clarify conclusions and support for those conclusions.

Data Sources

Each of the six intelligences included young women who are African American, Anglo, Asian, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern (one of each ethnic group in each of the six areas):

1. five college women identified as having verbal/linguistic intelligence
2. five college women identified as having logical/mathematical intelligence
3. five college women identified as having musical/rhythmic intelligence
4. five college women identified as having bodily/kinesthetic intelligence

5. five college women identified as having visual/spatial intelligence
6. five college women identified as having interpersonal intelligence.

The young women, ages 18-22, were identified both by ethnicity and by area of intelligence from 18 U.S. colleges and universities. Areas of giftedness were determined by the young women's participation in that particular intelligence beyond their high school years. This participation could have been in a college program, such as a major; an extracurricular activity; or a program outside the college setting. Generally, the young women were identified as gifted by others, such as professors, directors, acquaintances or friends. The giftedness was not self-identified before the interview, but areas of giftedness did emerge during the interview process.

A set of 13 interview questions were used in telephone or face-to-face interviews. The instrument was validated with a focus group comprised of five 18-year-old women, including African American, Anglo American, Asian American, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern American.

Sample of the African American participants in the study. Following are the six intelligences by the African American women who participated in the study:

1. Verbal linguistic intelligence—Kassi, a 21-year-old student majoring in radio and television
2. Logical/mathematical intelligence—Kendra, a 20-year-old student majoring in mechanical engineering
3. Musical intelligence—Amy, a 21-year-old student majoring in music education
4. Visual/spatial intelligence—Dara, a 20-year-old student majoring in business
5. Kinesthetic intelligence—Esther, a 20-year-old student majoring in English

6. Interpersonal intelligence— Brandi, a 20-year-old student majoring in biochemistry and statistics

Sample of the Anglo American participants in the study. Following are the six intelligences by the Anglo American women who participated in the study:

1. Verbal linguistic intelligence—Lauren, a 21-year-old student majoring in English

2. Logical/mathematical intelligence—Lynn, a 22-year-old graduate with a degree in accounting

3. Musical intelligence—Grace, a 21-year-old student majoring in music education, with a choral emphasis

4. Visual/spatial intelligence— Karen, a 20-year-old student majoring in communication design

5. Kinesthetic intelligence—Kate, a 22-year-old graduate with a degree in biomedical science, recipient of an equestrian scholarship

6. Interpersonal intelligence— Michelle, a 21-year-old student majoring in English

Sample of the Asian American participants in the study. Following are the six intelligences by the Asian American women who participated in the study:

1. Verbal linguistic intelligence—Crystal, a 22-year-old student majoring in business

2. Logical/mathematical intelligence—Priscilla, an 18-year-old student majoring in business

3. Musical intelligence—Margaret, a 21-year-old student majoring in music performance and engineering

4. Visual/spatial intelligence— Monica, an 18-year-old student majoring in biology

5. Kinesthetic intelligence—Anne, a 19-year-old student majoring in biology

6. Interpersonal intelligence— Janice, a 22-year-old student majoring in political science
Sample of the Hispanic participants in the study. Following are the six intelligences by

the Hispanic women who participated in the study:

1. Verbal linguistic intelligence—Alyssa, a 20-year-old student majoring in general studies
2. Logical/mathematical intelligence—Jacquelyn, a 22-year-old student majoring in chemical engineering
3. Musical intelligence—Erin, a 21-year-old student majoring in biology and anthropology
4. Visual/spatial intelligence— Vanessa, a 21-year-old student majoring in art and general studies
5. Kinesthetic intelligence—Chelsea, a 22-year-old graduate with a degree in government, recipient of a tennis scholarship
6. Interpersonal intelligence— Laura, a 22-year-old student majoring in social studies education

Sample of the Middle Eastern participants in the study. Following are the six intelligences by the Middle Eastern women who participated in the study:

1. Verbal linguistic intelligence—Saba, a 21-year-old student majoring in English and print journalism
2. Logical/mathematical intelligence—Nureen, a 21-year-old student majoring in biological sciences
3. Musical intelligence—Rachel, an 18-year-old student majoring in economics

4. Visual/spatial intelligence— Sarah, a 21-year-old student majoring in art and chemistry

5. Kinesthetic intelligence—Linda, an 18-year-old student majoring in business management

6. Interpersonal intelligence— Nakeem, a 20-year-old student majoring in economics

Results

Both internal and external barriers to success were identified by the gifted and talented young women. Five themes emerged under the internal barriers category, while four themes were found under the category of external barriers.

Internal Barriers

Internal barriers emerged from the data as the following themes: (a) perfectionism, (b) shyness, (c) lack of confidence, (d) procrastination, and (e) burnout.

Perfectionism

Reis (2002) pointed out that many gifted women face perfectionism as an internal barrier. Often, perfectionists are unable to feel satisfaction because they never seem to do things well enough (Hamachek, 1978). Schuler (1997) distinguished among perfectionist behaviors. For example, healthy perfectionists are aware of their need for order, but they feel supported by those around them, receiving encouragement to do their best academically. They understand that mistakes are part of learning. For the dysfunctional perfectionists, however, concern over mistakes result in a high state of anxiety. Likely consequences of this perfectionism include self-doubts, procrastination and prolonged anxiety and worry (Schuler, 1997). The gifted and talented young women described their perfectionism as a manageable burden.

Brandi, along with others, spoke of the role of perfectionism in her development.

I was always a perfectionist in high school and middle school. My friends would constantly complain that I was spending too much time and I had already made an A. If I messed up on a sheet of paper, I would tear it up and start all over again, in writing my name, which is pretty eccentric. In college, it is pretty much the same thing at times. I definitely feel like I need to turn in quality work or I am not doing my best. If I am not doing my best, then what is the point of doing it?

Karen's perfectionism also persisted in her college years: "In my work habits, sometimes I'm a bad overachiever. I like to try to get things perfect. I suffer from 'anal-retentiveness.'"

Dara reflected on her perfectionism as part of her work ethic.

I tend to be a bit of a perfectionist. It can be good in that I'll never settle, but at the same time, that could be a downfall because I never feel what I do is going to ever be good enough. I always feel like there's something else I need to be doing.

Shyness

Shyness, as an internal barrier, received mention by 10 of the 30 gifted and talented young women. These 10 mentioned shyness as an internal barrier in their developing years. Jacquelyn explained that she had trouble expressing what was on her mind. "I was always very shy and I guess expressing my feelings is very hard."

Crystal, an accountant and aspiring law student, was even more specific about her inhibition.

Whenever I was in junior high and elementary school, I was very shy. I wouldn't even have conversations with people or order my own food at restaurants.

Sarah, who immigrated to the United States, found that a job helped her overcome her natural shyness.

It's very hard when I have to talk to somebody the first time. I hardly ever talk to people who are even sitting next to me. I started working in the registrar's office, and it's helped. We have to be friendly to everyone who comes in the office. Now I can get along with everybody.

Erin recalled her early struggle with shyness, even though she served in key leadership roles at her university.

When I was younger, I was very, very shy. I kept to myself a lot. The first time I went to a public school, it was a junior high, and it was crazy and loud. I wasn't used to all of it, so I was very shy the first two years. I think I was able to overcome a lot during those two years. My early report cards said, "Needs to participate more," and my later ones said, "Talks too much."

Brandi also overcame shyness in middle school.

I didn't ever seek things like popularity, but I remember being shy and afraid to speak up.

Janice suffered from shyness in middle school, but she was able to overcome the shyness with prompting from her mother. Saba also admitted, "Before ninth grade, I was very, very shy."

Linda worked to overcome her shyness. "I was always shy, but after a while, I just kind of opened up to everything."

Monica described her inhibitions as a character trait.

I am very anti-social. Being anti-social is not very good. If I weren't, I'm sure it would improve my relations with other people. It would help me learn more.

The strength of that answer may be due to the "safety" of the response, however. An admission of shyness is not revealing much of one's private life to an interviewer.

Procrastination

Procrastination was a barrier that persisted with many of these young women, perhaps as a result of a degree of perfectionism.

Amy admitted that she procrastinated when learning new music.

I put things off until it comes down to the deadline. For some reason I always feel like learning a song won't take that long, when actually it does. But I work at it. And when the final project, the final outcome is done, you wouldn't suspect I did it the night before.

In describing her work habits, Lauren claimed to be the "queen of procrastination."

I am so lazy. There is nothing I can't put off for a little bit longer. It would be really helpful to me if that would not work out. But until now [in college] it's been fine.

Nureen considered that procrastination might have helped her in the long run.

If I did an assignment five days in advance and I didn't have pressure, I wouldn't be as good at it. The assignment really comes out better when I do it the night before. That is why I wait.

Kassi acknowledged the same pattern in her work habits.

I seem to get things done better if I wait. If I have a five-page paper due next Friday, my mind would not let me get started right now. I always think, "Well, I'll get started tomorrow." Then two or three days before, I always focus and get the job done.

Burnout

Two young women had experienced a period of burnout when they needed to step back and take a break. In her artistic work, Vanessa recalled a time when she pushed herself too far.

I'm very serious about my work. But I push myself and then I would get tired of it. I burned myself out just after high school because I was very tired of it. I think it was just so much. I consumed so much of it and then I burned myself out.

Dara returned from an internship with a major fashion firm in New York and felt the need to take some time off.

Right now I'm taking a semester off. I am taking time off to work and just to take a break. The internship took a lot out of me. It was my first time living in a huge city. It was very competitive and different.

External Barriers

A major category, external barriers, emerged from the data with four themes: (a) financial barriers, (b) others' expectations, (c) programming limitations, and (d) medical problems.

Financial barriers

Some girls experienced considerable financial difficulty. More than one girl faced financial challenges in paying for college expenses. Kendra spoke of serious poverty.

My mom was a single mother and although she got started off in corporate America, she got laid off, and our finances dropped dramatically. It made me want to do better in school so I wouldn't have to live through this when I got older and my kids wouldn't have to. It causes a lot of stress. Just dealing with being in a poor environment, I had drug dealers living across the street. People getting shot. Living on the street corner. It was a hard environment to grow up in.

Others' Expectations

The expectations of others can be a powerfully motivating force; however, when these expectations were perceived by our participants as stereotypes or gender roles, they became

barriers. The stated or unstated message of stereotypical ethnic or gender expectations was powerful and potentially destructive. Young women in our study responded to their perceptions of others' expectations, expressed verbally and nonverbally.

Three young women perceived others' expectations and judgments as barriers to their development. As a minority student in an engineering program, Kendra felt others had distinct expectations of her.

When I got to college, I realized I truly am a minority. So it's a constant pressure. The guys would joke about it. They sometimes remind you that you are a girl-- you are the minority. So it's constant pressure. You always want to do well because you don't want people to think you've got it just because they needed a woman.

Also, at a school with so few minorities, it's added pressure because you're not only trying to do well for yourself, you're trying to do well for your whole race. If you don't do well in a class, the professor may feel that Black people just can't cut it in this class and they can't cut it in this school. So it's more pressure because you're representing your whole race, even though you don't want to.

Brandi also felt pressure as a minority female, both at her magnet high school and in her extracurricular activities.

I did feel like being academically motivated separated me from the majority of the black students. I didn't attend the same parties they did; I didn't do the outside of school activities they did. I was afraid that a lot of people thought that I was stuck up because I was always with a different group of friends [in AP classes.] But that wasn't the case.

It's just that I didn't get to know them until after I graduated.

[At some out of school conferences,] other students would say things like “We for sure don’t want any rap music or music like that.” They would all look at me and I thought, “Well, how do you know I listen to rap music?” It didn’t make any sense. They were just negative toward Black culture.

Lynn, in a male-dominated accounting field, noticed a negativism toward her.

Some people look at you as a female and they suggest, “You’re not an accountant. Do you know what you’re doing?” People are predisposed to believe that accounting is a man’s world, I guess.

Programming Limitations

The gifted and talented young women perceived educational curricular programming limitations as an external barrier, citing some gifted programs and high school science programs as a deficit in their education. Kendra perceived her inner city school as a barrier to her achievement.

I feel like I was not as prepared as some of the people in my university. We didn’t have a lot of good teachers. The good teachers we did have always left. I feel like I could have gotten better teaching. I could have got better help. It’s helped me to understand that there’s a need for better teachers in inner city schools, especially math and science. I feel like we’ve been left behind.

Kate who majored in biomedical science, expressed dissatisfaction with the science offerings at her high school.

I wish I’d had the opportunity to take Anatomy and Physiology like some of my friends who went to bigger high schools.

Monica was identified as gifted and talented in elementary school, but received no benefit from the gifted program.

I was part of the gifted program, but they never really did anything. They gave us a test to see if we were good enough to be in the GT program but afterwards we never heard anything from them. After I left the school, they didn't even offer it to students anymore.

Lauren was somewhat critical of the gifted program in her school experience.

I feel like the program falls short in that there is too much personal freedom, not structured enough. I was constantly left to my own devices, and that [continued] in the high school program. They assume a little self-motivation when it is not there.

Medical Problems

One young woman described her recent struggle with mental illness.

Being diagnosed as bipolar has been a challenge. They switched me on so many different meds because a lot of them weren't working. One of the meds made me gain 60 pounds. I was so depressed with bi-polar. It's just crazy. You go through so many ups and downs.

But I have been symptom-free for a year and a half because now I am on good meds.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, American society has traditionally marginalized the achievement of gifted young women (Arnold, Noble, & Subotnik, 1996). Secondly, there is a dearth of research on the topic of gifted and talented young women of different ethnicities and different intelligences. Thirdly, this topic is significant because of America's demographic changes and growing diversity.

Further, gifted women have been socialized to minimize or hide their gifts and talents, to lower their own expectations, to discount their own skills and accomplishments (Reis, 1998).

Schools may contribute to this problem through insufficient identification and programming for diverse gifted individuals (Reis, 2004). Girls continue to face problems, such as teachers whose styles reinforce the dominance of boys and favor male interactional styles, curricula that reflect inequities, and a lower female participation in math and science courses (Sanders & Nelson, 2004).

Many broad-based studies on the female experience in school include large numbers of girls (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Orenstein, 1994; Pipher, 1995; Simmons, 2002). However, research on various ethnicities of gifted young women is very limited; thus, this study can make an important contribution to the literature. To date, there has not been a study that investigated gifted young women from a multiple-intelligence and multiple-ethnic perspective. Therefore, an in-depth examination of the educational experiences of several young women from various ethnicities has added richness and specificity to the research base and perhaps has assisted school leaders in addressing these issues. Changing demographics, globalization, the changing role of women, and along with problems previously cited, demand that educational leaders understand the lived experiences of different ethnic groups of gifted young women. School leaders can use the voices of gifted young women, which often go unheard, to devise systematic support and to eliminate obstacles for them.

The young women in this study represent a sample of the changing face of America—females of differing talents and females of differing backgrounds. Educational leaders of the twenty-first century will lead school populations of wide diversity; these diverse populations require a greater cultural understanding (Bean & Stevens, 2003).

According to Brizendine (2006), it is dangerous to generalize giftedness as it relates to gender, race, or ethnicity. Some issues, however, may be common to gifted women of color who

have been socialized in the United States. It is vitally important for the talents of all gifted young women to be recognized and encouraged so that barriers to their achievement can be addressed.

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